

Harvard Graduate School of Education

**Participation in Schools: What Do Mothers Get Out Of It?**  
Effects of Participation for a Group of Brazilian Mothers

Lúcia Vieira Dellagnelo

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## **Dedication**

To my parents Geraldo and Maria Amélia,

For their work and dedication in nurturing the intellectual curiosity, and the inner strength,  
that allowed me to pursue my most ambitious dreams.

To my husband Guido,

For his love and companionship which are the best gifts that life has presented me. Our  
relationship has always allowed me to grow and flourish.

To my children Pedro Henrique and Gabriel,

Who fill my life with laughter and love, and whose existence make me strive to be a better  
human being.

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## Participation in Schools: What Do Mothers Get Out Of It? Effects of Participation for a Group of Brazilian Women

Lúcia Vieira Dellagnelo

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the effects of participation for a group of mothers in two public schools in Brazil. It examines the effects mothers attribute to their experience of participation and how these effects have influenced their personal, family and community development.

The study was conducted using a small-scale, qualitative methodology and is organized around two main sections: a description of different contexts of parental participation in Brazilian schools, and the analysis of interview data on the effects of participation for women who participate. Data collection strategies included site observations, focus groups discussions and systematic interviews with mothers.

The results show that even within the same educational system, schools provided significantly different contexts for parental participation. Mothers attributed to their experience of participation effects pertaining to four main categories: personal enhancement and psychological well-being, the acquisition of knowledge and skills, expansion of their social networks and the downside of participation.

The intensity and extent of the effects of participation reported by mothers seemed to be linked to elements of the context of participation as well as to their personal characteristics. Poorer and less educated mothers seemed to have benefited the most from participation. The elements of the context of participation identified as related to positive effects included the kind of leadership exercised by principals, the provision of several

modalities of participation and of learning opportunities for parents, and participation in an authentic democratic form of school management.

The discussion of the implications of reported effects referred to the claim that the social relationships established to and through participation were a potential source of social capital for mothers, as well as for their families and communities.

The findings of the study indicate that participation in schools entails the potential to provide, particularly for women with low levels of education, opportunities for learning and exercising the skills necessary to assume a more pro-active role in their private and public lives. It points out, however, that this potential is not self-accomplishing and that it is necessary to provide certain conditions to make participation in schools a learning and empowering experience for mothers.

## **I- Introduction**

Much recent polemic advocating citizen participation has especially stressed the individual growth in personal capacity. (...) individuals will expand their capabilities and understandings so as to achieve more fully their potentialities as human beings (Salisbury, 1986, p.5 ).

Estela, a timid and poorly educated Brazilian woman, mother of four and originally a homemaker, reported significant changes in her life in the recent years. She became vice president of an important community association and was hired as coordinator of a community literacy program. Moreover, through new social acquaintances made while a parent representative in the School Council she managed to get a college scholarship for her older daughter.

Personal testimonies such as that of this mother constitute ideal examples in the argument that social participation can be a formative and empowering experience for individuals. Based on such personal stories, and largely on ideological beliefs, the claim of participation as an effective venue to personal and social development has been reinforced and perpetuated.

In fact, social participation has become one of the major clichés of the 90's. Despite the long historical background of the idea that people should participate in policies and programs which affect their lives (Pateman, 1970; Salisbury, 1984; Midgley, 1986) during the last decade there was a conversion of multiple, and even conflicting ideologies around the claim of social participation as a means to promote personal, institutional and community development.

Participation in schools is probably the area in which the potential benefits of social participation have been most emphatically claimed. Parental participation in schools is



expected to generate positive effects for students, for schools, for communities and also for parents who participate.

For students, parental participation in schools is expected to positively influence academic achievement by providing motivation, academic guidance and the encouragement of behaviors conducive to school learning (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Epstein, 1986, 1987; Wolfendale, 1991). For schools, participation of parents as local stake-holders is expected to raise schools' accountability and produce higher levels of institutional efficiency and effectiveness (Winkler, 1997). For communities, it has been argued that participation in schools may lead to higher stocks of social capital among community members (Putnam, 1993, 1995), and that the exercise of participatory practices may promote the consolidation of local democratic governance (Urzua & de Puelles, 1997).

Participation in schools is also expected to generate far-reaching effects for individuals who participate. According to Shaeffer (1992) participation is expected to enable people to: gain knowledge, awareness and democratic experience, increased self-confidence, self-reliance, pride and autonomy, control over their lives through actions to solve their problems; as well as social and political power.

However, the widespread belief that participation has the potential to generate such relevant effects for those who participate has not been substantiated by consistent empirical findings. In fact, the number of studies specifically designed to investigate the effects of participation for individuals is surprisingly low (Reimers, 1996). Theoretical assumptions and ideological beliefs have most likely hindered systematic research efforts on the tangible effects of the experience of participation. Moreover, researchers may have been discouraged by the complexity of the task, since participation is a process consisting of

different modes and levels of involvement and not one single event that can be quantitatively measured (UNDP, 1993; 1997).

The need for empirical evidence on the effects of participation goes beyond questioning theoretical assumptions and ideological beliefs. Participation in public institutions, such as schools, is being promoted for Latin American citizens as a key strategy to their personal and collective development (UNDP, 1993; Putnam, 1995; Toro, 1997). Living in societies characterized by high social inequality marks the lives of these citizens, particularly those of low income, with daily and unfair struggles for basic survival that consume much of their energy and personal resources (Kliksberg, 1997). Under this scenario, participation in schools represents a significant investment of scarce personal resources. Can participation fulfill its promises of promoting personal development for those who participate? What are the effects, if any, of participation on the lives of citizens?

The present study is aimed at addressing this question and contributing to the debate on participation in schools by providing a unique, and not often explored, perspective: the perception of parents who participate, and devote time and energy to a public institution. Through interviews with mothers who have been actively participating in public schools in Brazil, I examined the effects mothers attributed to their experience of participation and the implications of these effects for their personal, family and community development.

The study is organized around two main sections: a description of contexts of participation i.e., the main features of the institutional forms and social relationships established for parental participation in two municipal schools, and the analysis of the effects of participation reported by mothers. The major findings are discussed through a double focus, i.e. individual mothers and the context of participation in an effort to identify features of the contexts of participation related to the generation of reported effects.

Pertinent research is expected to foresee the consequences of actions and inform the design of social policies (Reimers & McGinn, 1997). To avoid turning participation in schools into a new panacea for all educational and social problems of developing countries, and an unfulfilled promise to individuals who participate, this study hopes to provide information needed for a critical assessment of the potential promised by participation in schools and the crucial contextual elements needed to accomplish this potential.

## **II-The Theoretical Framework**

### **II.1-The Claim of Participation**

The rhetoric on social participation has been the tonic of the debate on social development around the globe. Diverse sectors of society, representing different and even contradictory ideologies, have been defending social participation as a key strategy to personal development, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public institutions and to consolidate fragile democratic regimes through the implementation of mechanisms of direct participation of citizens in the public sector (Shaeffer, 1992; Putnam, 1993; 1995; UNDP, 1993; 1997).

Social policies in Brazil, as in several other developing countries, have been deeply influenced by the thrust towards social participation. Public sector reforms have focused on administrative decentralization and increased autonomy for public institutions in order to allow for greater citizens participation (Reimers, 1996; Moura Castro & Carnoy, 1997; Winkler, 1997).

Participation is far from constituting a new theme. The idea that citizens should participate in the public domain of their societies has been defended since the beginning of occidental civilization and has been embedded in concepts of community development and human rights across different nations and cultures (Salisbury, 1980; Midgley, 1986). Social participation is believed to constitute much more than a political and institutional arrangement: it has been argued that it generates a psychological effect on those who participate, creating thus a continuous interaction between institutional functioning and the qualities and psychological attitudes of the individuals who participate (Pateman, 1970).

However, the definitions of social participation have assumed such a breadth and level of generalization that it makes it difficult to construct shared meaning around what participation really means as well as what it entails. Most of the recent definitions are being proposed by international development agencies that are reportedly committed to promoting 'participatory development' within the countries they work (World Bank, 1995; UNDP, 1993, 1997; IDB, 1998).

Participation is defined in the international development literature as a process which requires "the voluntary and democratic involvement of people in: a) contributing to development effort, b) sharing equitably in the benefits deriving therefrom and c) decision making in respect of setting the goals, formulating policies and planning and implementing economic and social development programs" (United Nations Resolution 1929, cited in Midgley, 1986). A more general definition states that participation "is not only an agreement to follow but an active decision to assume responsibility in considering the rationale, implications and potential outcomes of any particularly process" (UNICEF/EFA, 1993, p.3).

Difficulties in defining participation more precisely derive from the impossibility of understanding it without a context, from the wide range of degrees and levels it may take, and the quality or authenticity of such participation (Coraggio, 1996; Anderson, 1998). In addition, it is a social phenomenon deeply influenced by the cultural, political and institutional context in which it occurs (Shaeffer, 1992; Anderson, 1998). Thus the analysis of the effects of participation need to take into account where and how it has taken place, as well as the social meaning and value attribute to the experience of participating.

Despite these difficulties, and the variability that definitions of participation may assume, two major assumptions seem to consistently underlie the different ways social participation has been conceived.

The first assumption is that participation is a means to development, that is, participation is conceived as instrumental to social and economic development (UNDP, 1993; Evans, 1993; Putnam, 1993). The basic premise of this assumption is that participation of citizens in the design and implementation of social policies and programs may increase their effectiveness and sustainability. Under this assumption, terms such as 'participation of stakeholders' (World Bank, 1995; UNDP, 1999) or 'partnerships between governments and the civil society' (Fiszbein & Lowden, 1999) are employed to defend local participation in public institutions as a low-cost strategy to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of their services, and to raise the accountability of governments in developing countries (Prawda, 1993; Birdsall & Sabot, 1996; Moura Castro & Carnoy, 1997). Individuals, according to this assumption, are agents of change and should act as informed consumers of social services (see Wehlage & White, 1995 for a critique of such view).

Another assumption underlying how participation has been conceived regards participation as an end in itself, as a basic human right (Azevedo, 1997; Gadotti, 1997; Demo, 1996). Usually this conception of participation is proclaimed by progressive political parties who seek to establish mechanisms of direct participation within the representative democratic regime (Midgley, 1986; Azevedo, 1997). But it has also been claimed by the community development movement in the 60's and 70's as reason for community organization and action against the role performed by public institutions (Faundez, 1993; Cardarelli & Rosenberg, 1998).

Under this last assumption participation is also considered a potential source for personal self-fulfillment, which would be derived from the perception of contributions to public institutions and commitment to community issues (Faundez, 1993). Moreover, participation is believed to constitute an opportunity for individuals to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for leading active and productive lives in democratic societies (Pateman, 1970; Urzua & de Puelles, 1997; Coraggio, 1996). In this sense, individuals are considered both contributors to and beneficiaries of the process of social participation.

The assumptions underlying different conceptions of participation are obviously not mutually exclusive and can be separated only for analytical purposes. Most researchers now agree that participation is both a means and an end to social development (Schaeffer, 1992; UNDP, 1997), and that it has the potential to generate positive effects for individuals, institutions and whole communities. It is interesting to note that despite the semantic and ideological fog surrounding the concept of social participation, the belief in its potential to generate positive effects at individual, institutional and community levels has not been systematically questioned nor empirically investigated.

Instead, because participation has been repeatedly associated with relevant social outcomes, the level of citizen participation has been expanded to the point of being considered an indicator of a country's potential for social, and even economic, development (Putnam, 1993; 1995).

In relation to Latin America, there are antagonistic views about the level of citizen participation in the countries of the region. The hegemonic view is that most countries display low levels of social participation (Demo, 1997; Toro, 1997), which has been pointed out as a considerable barrier to their social development (Putnam, 1995). According to this view, citizens' relationships with public institutions have been traditionally characterized by distrust, frustration or indifference (CENPEC, 1995; Gadotti, 1997; Kliksberg, 1997), although significant changes in these attitudes can be noticed in the last two decades (Toro, 1997).

Another view, defended for example by the sociologist Alain Touraine, is that there has never existed a clear separation between the state and the civil society in Latin American countries, and that politics in the region take place more through participation than representation. For Touraine, the importance of family life and interpersonal relationships, characteristic of the cultures of most countries in the region, shapes social and political mobilization. In this dynamic, social participation assumes great importance, particularly women's participation, since women are social actors who respond directly to social policies implemented by the State (Touraine, 1988 in Stromquist, 1997).

Despite the divergences in opinion about the historical levels of social participation in Latin America, the fact is that in the last two decades a clear mobilization of the civil society to participate in public institutions has occurred in Brazil. This mobilization has been encouraged by the country's re-democratization process, and the implementation of public

policies which proposed decentralization and increased autonomy of public institutions at local level (Santos Filho, 1993). The 'Third Sector', constituted by the organizations of the civil society many of them headed by women, has become a key partner in the design and implementation of social programs (Ioshpe, 1997). There is also an increasing commitment of the private sector to invest in social programs and to stimulate employees to engage in voluntary work. The reported number of volunteers and citizens engaged in civil activities, such as community health and educational programs, is rising (Comunidade Solidária, 1999).

While there is still no formal assessment of the tangible effects of this recent mobilization towards social participation on public institutions and communities in general, even less is known about the effects of such participation for individuals. Many Brazilian citizens have long been engaged in activities to promote social development. Groups related to the progressive faction of the Catholic Church, most of them formed primarily by women, played an important role in the defense of human rights and in the demand for the provision of basic social services (Ribeiro, 1989).

There is limited information on what happened to the lives of the women who actively participated in their communities. It is reasonable to expect that the effects of participation for those women were different depending on the form and intensity of their participation and their socio-economic characteristics (Salisbury, 1986; Stromquist, 1997).

One of the few comprehensive studies on women's participation in Latin America was conducted by A. Brasileiro and K. Judd. (1996). The study tried to identify the main approaches utilized by women to participating in the public life of their communities, and the relationship of these approaches to women's personal characteristics. The two basic approaches to social participation identified by the study were: the 'feminine' and the



‘feminist’. The feminine approach is related to women’s struggle to fulfill the caretaker role socially assigned to them. To this end, women from all educational and socio-economic backgrounds participate in grass-roots organizations and in public institutions responsible for providing the basic services to the welfare of their children and families. Driven by the caretaker identity, women have participated in successful movements to demand, for example, the creation of day care centers, schools, and water and sewerage provision for their communities (French, 1996).

The other approach within which women participate is the ‘feminist’. This approach was taken initially by the middle class, highly educated women who sought to broaden women’s social and political participation. The organized feminist groups played an important role in the democratization process after the military dictatorships in several Latin American countries and have been struggling to increase the number of women representatives in the mainstream political institutions.

Brasileiro and Judd argued that through both approaches participation of women in Latin American countries has been rising, and that by organizing within neighborhood and community associations women have developed leadership and negotiating skills that were vital for the improvements of their communities. However, they also note that progress in increasing the level of social participation in Latin America’s women is hindered by sexist practices which prevent women from assuming more important and visible social roles. Stromquist (1995) elaborated on the idea that social participation entails issues of power and politics which have been historically associated with men, and that the socialization of girls and boys under this cultural premise has perpetuated gender inequalities in political and social participation in many countries.

In Brazil, the public institution in which women have been most actively and consistently participating are schools (Ribeiro, 1989). The reasons for the predominant participation of women in schools can be traced back to Brasileiro and Judd's (1996) study. Women participate in schools because schools perform a complementary role as caretakers and educational agents for their children, and/or because they know the importance of a good public education for improving the personal and professional development of the young persons in their communities (Sposito, 1989; Ribeiro, 1989; CENPEC, 1995). Moreover, in many Brazilian communities schools are the most accessible public institution, and even the center of all community organization. Schools seem to constitute for a number of Brazilian women the most widely adopted way to start participating in the public life of their communities. In many cases, this form of participation has been seminal to other forms of social participation (Campos, 1995; Ghanem, 1995; French, 1996).

The question which remains to be answered is whether participation in schools can hold its promise of generating positive effects for the women who participate. In the affirmative what would these effects be? Understanding what participation in schools entails and how it has been conceived in Brazilian schools is necessary in order to advance the discussion of the effects which may have been generated for individuals who participated.

## **II.2- Parental Participation in Schools**

The topic of parental participation in schools has been evident in the educational literature in the last decade. Several studies have been conducted to investigate the influence of parents' participation in students' academic achievement and in the functioning of schools. Although some of the evidence presented in the literature may be questioned, it seems that a consensus has been reached about the positive influence parents may exert on academic achievement and the general schooling process of their children (Baker and Stevenson, 1986; Wolfendale, 1991; Chavkin, 1993; Scheneider & Coleman, 1993; Comer, 1994; Henderson & Berla, 1994).

The idea that participation in schools can be also be a formative and empowering experience for parents (Cohran & Dean, 1991; Comer & Haynes, 1991; UNICEF/EFA, 1993; Anderson, 1998), although also strongly claimed, has been less investigated and research designed to investigate such a claim has faced significant challenges.

The first challenge stems from the absence of a clear operational definition of parents' participation in schools and the specific effects it is supposed to generate for parents. Parents' participation can take many forms and differ considerably in terms of functions and levels (Prawda, 1993; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Winkler, 1997). A wide range of behaviors, beliefs and feelings are considered a part of the phenomenon called 'parent participation' in schools, making it an umbrella term that describes all the models and types of liaison among parents, schools and other community institutions that provide for children (Khan, 1996). Epstein (1987) proposed an organization of four major types of parent involvement in schools: a) basic obligations of parents; b) school-to-home communication; c) parent involvement in learning activities at home and d) parent

involvement at the school. The last type includes the participation of parents in schools' governing bodies, such as School Councils, which will be the form of parental participation more directly discussed in the present study.

The second challenge in investigating the effects of parental participation in schools derives from the existence of multiple, and not often explicit, assumptions underlying the discourse or even programs designed to increase parental participation. Each assumption has different implications for the effects that the experience of participation is supposed to generate for parents. Swap (1990) provided a useful summary of three competing assumptions which have been utilized in the educational arena.

The first assumption is that to increase students' achievement a continuity of expectations, values and attitudes between home and school is necessary. Thus parents are expected to participate in their children's schooling by teaching them the importance of school learning, supporting school personnel, and providing academic and learning opportunities for children at home. Although this assumption has been, deliberately or not, adopted by many educators, it has been criticized for its excessive focus on professionals' prerogatives to determine the knowledge, values and attitudes parents should stimulate in their children (Schneider, 1993; Epstein, 1986). Parents' failure to comply with school personnel's expectations is seen as hindering student achievement and increasing the risk of school drop-out (Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1997). James Coleman's (1987; 1991) idea of social capital between families and schools, and its influence on the creation of human capital, is based on a similar assumption of continuity of values and expectations between households and schools.

It is important to highlight that under this assumption parents are regarded as learners who need to be socialized into school values and norms in order to transmit them

to their children. Although this vision varies according to parents educational background and socio-economic status (Lareau, 1986; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993) the general idea is that particularly low educated/low income parents would benefit from participation in schools by learning how to be better parents and how to stimulate the academic achievement of their children.

The second assumption underlying efforts to increase parents' participation in schools is based on a non-deficit model, that is, on the recognition that parents have strengths and valuable knowledge which can enrich and facilitate the educational process of their children (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Comer, 1993). This model suggests building upon resources existing in the community and adapting formal educational practices to incorporate local cultural and social characteristics. Although this assumption claims mutual respect and learning between school personnel and parents, the focus is still on professionals who retain the power to decide what aspects of parents' contributions will be incorporated or not (Wolfendale, 1991; Carrasquillo, 1993). Under this assumption parents are viewed as potential contributors to schools, but their participation is expected to be an instrumental means to help schools to perform their educational role (Fine, 1993).

The third assumption is that in order to be effective, parents' participation in schools should be based on a partnership model, which requires attitudinal and political changes towards mutual respect and shared power. This assumption is being defended by educators who regard partnerships between school personnel and parents as the most effective way to influence student's learning (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Snow et. al, 1991) and the only authentic way participation in schools can become an empowering and formative experience for parents (Cohran & Dean, 1991; Fine, 1993; Anderson, 1998). It has been argued that in order to establish effective partnerships, schools must provide learning

opportunities for professionals and parents to learn the skills necessary to democratic decision making (Coraggio, 1996; Cizesky, 1997), and formal structures for parental participation in the institutional setting (Anderson, 1998).

Under this assumption parents are viewed both as contributors and beneficiaries of participation in schools. An illustrative case is provided by UNICEF's 'Education For All', one of the most comprehensive international educational initiatives of the last decade, which proposed the idea of participation in schools as a strategy for life-long learning and stated that "people participation is a sine qua non... by definition education for all must engage people widely and actively as beneficiaries and contributors [in the educational process]" (UNICEF/EFA, 1993, p.2).

Thus, the three main assumptions underlying efforts to increase the participation of parents in schools are the need to 'educate' them about school knowledge, values, and practices in order to ensure home-school continuity; to incorporate their values and knowledge in school curriculum and practices and thus make schooling a relevant experience for students and communities; and to establish effective partnerships between parents and school personnel based on shared power and responsibilities.

The urge to increase parental participation in schools is also being advocated by researchers and professionals of international development agencies based on a different set of assumptions. These assumptions refer to the need to establish a framework of collaboration between community and schools for educational change (Schaefer, 1992; UNICEF/EFA, 1993; Stone & Wehlage, 1994); to increase school efficiency and effectiveness by involving parents as direct stake-holders in the management of schools, and to increase schools' accountability (Winkler, 1997). All these assumptions have been

utilized as basic premises for educational reform in developing countries (Moura Castro & Carnoy, 1997).

The existence of powerful claims, based on multiple and diverse assumptions, does not compensate for the lack of empirical evidence on the effects of participation in schools for parents. With the exception of the effects related to parents' influence on students academic achievement, which have been the target of several studies (see Henderson & Berla, 1994, for a comprehensive revision), claims of positive effects for parents and communities deriving from participation have not been investigated by a significant body of empirical research.

Thus, as happens with the concept of social participation, participation in schools as a formative experience for parents seems to be defended more out of 'conviction' (Wolfendale, 1992) than empirical results. Kerbow and Bernhart (1993) have shown, for example, that in the United States there is a tendency to design programs to increase the participation of low-income, or ethnic minority parents, even when these parents present higher levels of participation than non-minority parents.

Unfortunately an exception, but a very interesting example of a study specifically designed to investigate the effects of participation on parents was conducted by R. Salisbury (1980). Salisbury tried "to measure and evaluate the impact of participation on the participating individual" (1980, p.19). Using a large sample of parents participating in six school districts and applying quantitative analysis to their responses, Salisbury found that parents reported a wide range of effects from participation, including personal development, information, social interaction and subsequent civic involvement. He also found that the more people participate the greater the impact on them.

However, Salisbury was not able to identify systematic and strong correlations between the multiple variables he used to investigate the impact of participation on parents. He concludes that participation does change the life of some individuals under certain circumstances and that the contexts of participation are directly associated with the generation of certain effects. He concluded his work by stating:

We must not exaggerate the breadth of this mobilization or the depth of the transformation. We are talking about fractions. Only a fraction of the population becomes active at all; in turn, only a fraction of that population exhibits any significant effects; and only a fraction of the lives and characters of those affected are really altered in any fundamental or lasting way. The consequences of school participation for the society as a whole are inevitably at the margin. In any brief period of time there will be only small changes, in a few people and at the edge of policy and program. But these effects are not to be dismissed therefore as trivial. For one thing they are cumulative. Spread over time and space these small changes in direction can build a very different kind of community, with participatory norms, self-confident citizens and the enhanced mutual understanding and respect that so often accompanies active citizenship (p. 200).

From his concluding remarks it appears that Salisbury resorted to ideological and idealistic stances to continue defending the claim of positive effects deriving from participation. He also acknowledged throughout his book the complexity of disentangling and understanding the variables involved in the phenomenon of participation in schools. In fact, Salisbury's study provided a very useful research background for the present study by noting the need of carefully addressing two critical issues.

First, by demonstrating how forms and effects of participation differed across school districts Salisbury pointed out the magnitude of the influence of the contexts of participation on the generation of effects for parents. He emphasized that participation in schools acquires different meanings and forms according to the context in which it happens and according to the socio-economic characteristics of the participants (an issue also discussed by Lareau, 1986, and Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).



The second critical issue was related to the methodology utilized to identify effects of participation. Although Salisbury's study utilized interviews to collect the first round of responses, the follow-up round in which forms were sent through mail got only approximately a return of only 55%. Other reports of research on parental participation utilizing questionnaires have cited return rates of less than 50% (Dauber & Epstein, 1992), which consequently introduces an important selection bias in the sample. Parents who responded the questionnaire tended to be more educated and more involved with the school (Epstein, 1987). Moreover, through questionnaires it is not possible to gather the opinion of parents with low levels of literacy and to capture their culture-specific models of participation (Fuller et al. 1996).

Therefore, the present study was designed to include a careful description of the contexts of participation, and a series of in-depth interviews with mothers in order to capture the complex and multidimensional nature of the experience of participation in their lives.

The analysis of the effects of participation also includes the discussion of an increasingly claimed effect of participation in schools: namely, the generation of social capital (UNICEF, 1993; Coleman, 1991; 1994; Braatz & Putnam, 1997; Wehlage & White, 1995; Croninger & Lee, 1996). The fact that few previous research efforts have been undertaken to investigate the recent, and certainly appealing, hypothesis that family participation in schools can be a strategy to social capital generation constituted both a challenge and a window of opportunity to further explore this claim.

## **II.3- Participation in Schools and Social Capital**

The concept of social capital was introduced into the educational literature by Coleman (1987; 1990; 1991; 1994), to refer to the benefits generated through social relationships within families and communities, which can then be converted into opportunities for individual and family development. Coleman's work was preceded by that of economists (Loury, 1977) and other sociologists (Bourdieu, 1986; 1998) who proposed the concept of social capital to describe the assets and resources an individual could draw from formal membership in a group.

The definition of social capital assumes different connotations as researchers apply it to different domains (e.g. Wehlage & White, 1995; Braatz & Putnam, 1997; Croninger & Lee, 1996). In fact, one of the major criticisms directed to the concept of social capital refers to its excessive inclusiveness and vagueness (Portes, 1998). Coleman himself stated that social capital should be defined by its function since it is not a single entity (1990). Although a precise definition is lacking, all forms of social capital are expected to have at least two characteristics in common: they must derive from social relationships among individuals and groups and they may facilitate or constrain collective and individual actions (Fustenberg & Hughes, 1995).

The theoretical assumption that links social capital and family participation in schools has been developed by two different, although not mutually exclusive, strands in the educational literature. One of these strands associates children's cognitive, psychological and social development with the intensity, forms and content of the relationships established within families and within schools, and the problems derived from discrepancies among them (Coleman, 1987; 1991; 1994; Fustenberg & Hughes, 1995;

Stanton-Salazar, 1996; Schneider & Coleman, 1994; Hofferth, Boisjoly & Duncan, 1998). This line of reasoning is very similar to the assumption of continuity of values, knowledge and attitudes that have been regarded as crucial for school achievement and that have also been used to defend higher parental participation in schools.

A more sociological perspective claims that the relationships established among families and between families and schools as formal institutions can be instrumental to other forms of community organization in the promotion of educational effectiveness and individual and family development. In this sense, the relationships between families and schools are more formally established around a common objective, and social capital is considered to be simultaneously a prerequisite and a consequence of social participation (Putnam, 1993, 1995; Wehlage & White, 1995; Stone & Wehlage, 1994; Ritchey-Vance, 1996; UNDP, 1997).

These two theoretical strands share the assumption that social capital, in its multiple forms, can be generated from and converted into individual and collective benefits through social relationships. Croninger and Lee (1996) propose to categorize these relationships into two types: 'personal social networks' which include the relationships of family members, relatives, neighbors and friends that are not purposefully created or formally constructed; and 'public social networks' in which relationships are constructed to pursue a shared goal and imply the need for formal recognition of membership, rights and responsibilities. It is argued that membership in both personal and public social networks may generate benefits for individuals, families and communities.

The concept of social capital certainly constitutes a promising analytical framework for analyzing the effects of school participation, particularly in the sense of illuminating how the social relationships established for and through participation can constitute

resources for individuals who participate. It is also important to examine the conditions under which the social relationships established through participation can better fulfill, or hinder, its potential for advancing individual, family and community development (Portes & Landolt, 1996; Portes, 1998) and the elements involved in social capital generation (Hofferth, Boisjoly & Duncan, 1999; Durston, 1999).

Social participation, parents' participation in schools and social capital are closely linked concepts with one common shortcoming – they all lack the empirical evidence necessary to understand what effects they generate on the lives of individuals. Moreover, they tend to be discussed in a cultural vacuum, as if the context in which they occur would not shape the form and processes they encompass.

The present study aims at illuminating some of these concepts through a small-scale, qualitative study in which the voices of mothers who participate constitute the main data source. In addition, a careful review of the historical and current forms of parental participation Brazilian schools is provided in order to allow the reader to assess the multiple facets, and the complexity, involved in the analysis of the effects of participation on the lives of a group of Brazilian women.

### **III-The Research Context**

#### **III.1- Brazil- The country and Its Challenges**

Brazil is a country characterized by sharp contrasts in the conditions of living and economic resources available for its citizens: extreme poverty and great wealth, sophisticated and primitive health care, good quality higher education and illiteracy can all be found side-by-side (Londoño, 1996; IDB, 1998).

These drastic contrasts are partly due to the concentration of resources in certain regions of the country. Brazil is a country with continental dimensions, with a population of approximately 157 million, living in a territory of 8,547,403 sq.km. The average monthly income of the population aged 10 and over is approximately US\$ 290, although there is great variability in the average monthly income depending on the region (US\$158 in the Northeast and US\$ 366 in the Southeast according to IBGE, 1999).

The Southeast and the South are considered the most prosperous regions, with economic and social indicators similar to those of developed countries. In the North and the Northeast regions, where 50% of the poorest segment of the population live, the indicators correspond to those of the underdeveloped nations of the world (PNUD, 1996).

However, the huge social inequality in Brazil cannot be explained solely by the regional differences. In fact, while general economic indicators are gradually improving in the country as a whole, social indicators continue to demonstrate the dramatic social inequality among the population (IDB, 1998). The richest 20% of the population hold 65% of the total wealth while the poorest 50% hold only 12% (PNUD/IPEA, 1996). The most recent Human Development Report (UNDP, 1999) shows that Brazil occupies the 79<sup>th</sup>

position in the human development index rank, making it a country with medium human development conditions, far behind countries with lower economic resources.

Social inequality among Brazilians has become not only an issue of social justice but a matter of economic development. The integration in the increasingly global economy requires that greater numbers of the population have access to adequate education and health services, and to other learning environments conducive to the acquisition of the cognitive and social skills necessary to become active and productive citizens (ECLAC/UNESCO, 1992).

Brazil has to face at least two educational challenges to prepare its citizens to live in a global community: to provide quality and relevant public education, ensuring students' attainment of basic knowledge and technological skills, and to prepare individuals to negotiate and participate in democratic and equitable multicultural contexts ( Mello, 1994; Coraggio, 1996; Urzua & de Puelles, 1997).

In order to meet these challenges a country must possess an efficient and effective educational system. This is not the case in Brazil: the public education system has been traditionally characterized by high inefficiency and ineffectiveness (Birdsall & Sabot, 1996). The investments in education, besides being lower than in other developing nations, have been severely mismanaged leaving the country with a bleak educational scenario (Plank, Sobrinho & Xavier, 1996).

### **Public Education in Brazil**

Educational statistics corroborate the negative depiction of the Brazilian public educational system. The average years of schooling for a Brazilian worker is 5.3, much lower than in other Latin American countries (IBGE, 1996), and grade repetition is

extremely high, affecting up to 50% of students in elementary school in certain regions of the country (Birsall & Sabot, 1996; Schiefebein & Wolff, 1992; Ribeiro, 1993).

Although significant improvements were achieved in the last decade, particularly in increasing student enrollment in public schools and in reducing illiteracy rates, the educational system is still not producing good results. For example, the increase in educational attainment among the population was inferior to what was expected when compared to the increase in the per capita income observed in the same period (MEC, 1996; PNUD/IPEA, 1996).

Another critical aspect of the Brazilian educational system is related to the social inequality that it helps to perpetuate. Regional economic and social differences are directly correlated with educational outcomes. Indicators of poor quality and inefficiency of public schools are higher in the North and Northeast of the country, while better quality education may be found in public schools in the South and Southeast. The Northeast, for example, has the highest percentage of 'lay teachers', i.e. teachers without minimum teaching qualifications, who sometimes have only slightly higher educational attainment than the pupils they are expected to teach (PRASEM, 1996).

More alarming are the differences in enrollment associated to income level. While 97% of students whose families have monthly incomes higher than 2 minimum salary (m.s.) per capita (approx. US\$ 140) attend elementary education (1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade), only 75% of students from poorer families do so (Ministry of Education-MEC, 1996).

Despite these negative features, promising trends are emerging in the Brazilian educational scenario. More and more Brazilians are having access to, and pursuing, higher levels of educational attainment. The enrollment of students across the different levels of

the system is more evenly distributed, indicating that more students are reaching the level of secondary education (de Castro, 1999).

These improvements seem to be the outcome of a joint effort among the government and several organizations of the civil society to reform the public educational system. The realization that in a global economy, knowledge (including information and awareness of democratic rights and responsibilities) and competitive productivity are key elements for a nation's economic and social development (ECLAC/UNESCO, 1992) has mobilized politicians, economists and social activists to push for significant reforms in the Brazilian educational system.

### **The Brazilian Educational Reform**

Important reforms to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Brazilian educational system have been undertaken. Since the 1988 Constitution, which reaffirmed the responsibility of the State to provide free basic education for all citizens, several initiatives have been promoted, such as: a) the development and adoption of a national evaluation system for monitoring the quality of basic education (SAEB); b) the national curricular parameters (PCN), which provided minimum curricular content to be taught in all public schools; c) the possibility of direct financial transfers to schools and d) the creation of the Fund for Maintenance and Development of Fundamental Education and Valorization of Teaching (FUNDEF), which was created to alleviate the discrepancies in expenditures in education among different states and municipalities and in teachers' salaries and basic qualifications (PRASEM, 1997).

Most of these initiatives stemmed from the new national legislation (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação-LDB, No. 9.394), approved in 1996, which proposed



significant changes in the organization, management and curricula of the public schools. Different from the educational legislation imposed by preceding authoritarian government administrations, the new LDB legislation was broadly debated by educators, non-governmental organizations and different sectors of the civil society. The keystone of the new legislation is decentralization and autonomy at the school and municipal level, and a collaborative system, with specific attributions and responsibilities for the federal, state and municipal administrations (PRASEM, 1997; Costa, Maia & Mandel, 1997).

The current organization of the Brazilian educational system reflects the principle of decentralization and collaboration among different governmental levels. The emphasis on the municipal level for the provision of fundamental education (1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade) is justified by the need to involve local actors and make schools accountable for the population they serve (Castro & Carnoy, 1997).

The federal government is responsible for the coordination of the national educational policy and for the elaboration of the National Education Plan, which should articulate the different levels of the system. It is also in charge of public universities and federal technical schools. The state government is responsible for the provision of secondary education and for ensuring that municipalities in the state are capable of meeting the needs of fundamental education for all eligible students. The municipal government is responsible for fundamental education, which comprises the 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade and is compulsory for children from 7 to 14 years of age, and pre-school education, from 0 to 6 years of age (MEC, 1996).

It is expected that the three levels of the educational system work in collaboration and that priority will be given to fundamental education, which holds the largest number of

enrollments – 32.4 million students are currently enrolled at this level in public schools (de Castro, 1999).

The focus on the municipality as the main provider of fundamental education was initially a controversial issue, particularly by those who feared the perpetuation of inequalities due to the discrepancies in financial resources of municipalities (Mello, 1988). This was not a groundless concern: although the administrative decentralization of the Brazilian educational system has been gradually implemented over the last decades, only recently has it been accompanied by the decentralization of financial resources (Plank, Sobrinho & Xavier, 1996; Castro & Carnoy, 1997). To overcome this problem the most recent educational reform included the adoption of mechanisms to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources among states and municipalities.

Probably the most comprehensive of such mechanisms is the FUNDEF. Created in 1996, and fully implemented in 1998, FUNDEF is a federal fiscal fund formed by different tax sources. Its main goal is to promote a more equitable, and reliable, distribution of financial resources to education and the establishment of a minimum per pupil expenditure in state and municipal educational systems. The resources of FUNDEF are distributed according to the number of students enrolled in state and municipal schools, and must be allocated to pay teachers' salaries (60%) and other expenses directly related to the quality of education. It also includes special funds for teacher training and certification programs, aimed at promoting a minimum standard of qualifications for teachers working in urban/rural, poor/rich areas of the country (PRASEM, 1997).

The educational reforms seem to be producing positive results, particularly in the sense of reducing the drastic educational inequalities among different regions of the country (de Castro, 1999). Perhaps the most important aspect has been turning education into a

national strategic theme, and stimulating the participation of different segments of society in the discussion on how to improve the quality of public schools. Several opportunities and modalities of participation have been created, opening communication channels between the government, educational agencies and other social sectors. This disposition for public debate is part of the general democratization process of Brazilian public institutions, which still needs to be consolidated through genuine and massive popular participation (Urzua & de Puelles, 1996).

Promoting parents' participation in public schools, a rhetoric also present in former Brazilian educational reforms, seems to have finally acquired concrete and pragmatic meaning. Democratic school management has become one of the basic principles of educational reform across the country, and several modalities of participation are being implemented in schools (Paro, 1996; Gadotti, 1997). A historical background of how parents have been participating in Brazilian schools in the last decades will provide the contextual information necessary for a critical assessment of the potential of the reforms to actually promote authentic participation of parents in the management of public schools.

### **III.2-Forms of Participation in Brazilian Schools**

Since the 1930's Brazilian schools have possessed a mechanism through which parents and members of the community can participate in the life of public schools. A critical review of those forms of participation shows, however, that such mechanisms were used mainly to perpetuate social inequalities, as a means of social control of the educational demands of the low income population, and to exonerate the State of its responsibility of providing free public education (Sposito, 1989).

The first formal instance of participation in schools were the “School Cashiers” created to provide financial assistance to students from low income families and to provide extra funds for school functioning. Interestingly, the parents and community members invited to be part of the School Cashier were expected to be ‘notable community members’, implying elitist criteria for who would best perform the fund-raising functions expected from School Cashiers (Cizesky, 1996).

The School Cashiers functioned informally until 1941, when they become compulsory in all public schools. The formal institutionalization of School Cashiers was actually a recognition that the government was not able, or not politically interested, in providing the financial resources necessary for school functioning. In 1971, a new educational national legislation (LDB/71) extinguished the School Cashiers and transferred their functions to Parent and Teacher Associations (APMs).

Created almost concurrently to the School Cashiers, the Associations of Parents and Teachers (APMs) performed very similar functions. Having been founded as a result of a pseudo-progressive discourse of integration between school and community, the APMs were in reality another mechanism to ask parents to raise money for the education of their children. The existence of APMs, and their effectiveness, depended greatly on the will and interest of school professionals to support their activities. As an example, 1002 APMs were founded in public schools in São Paulo in 1931, and by 1933 only 340 were functioning (Cizesky, 1996).

The history of APMs provides an informative and fact-based representation of the experience of parents’ participation in Brazilian public schools. APMs were the longest lasting, and probably the most manipulated modality of participation in the public education system. Three ideological discourses supported, intermittently, the existence of

APMs: a populist and demagogic notion of integration with the local community; a liberal perspective on improving school effectiveness and efficiency through learning the educational demands of the low income population; and a pragmatic view of sharing the financial costs of public education between government and families.

In reality the APMs performed almost exclusively the fund-raising task. Although the norms and structure of APMs were changed over the years, one fundamental aspect remained: the APMs were coordinated by the principal and school professionals, and parents were subordinated to them particularly in relation to any decision regarding educational matters. In fact, to the principal was reserved the right to select the parents to participate in the APMs, and most selected parents possessed high social status or were clearly submissive to school authorities (Cizesky, 1996). In most APMs the only contribution expected from parents was to raise money to be allocated according to priorities defined by school professionals.

In 1971, the new educational law (LDB/71) sanctioned by the military regime made the existence of APMs compulsory in every public school. It is at least questionable why after 40 years of being optional in schools, and not producing the claimed integration with local communities, the existence of APMs was again imposed as a modality of parents participation.

Several Brazilian researchers (Sposito, 1989; Bueno, 1987; Ribeiro, 1989; Romão, 1997) reaffirm the view that APMs were maintained for so long by different governments because it was an important way to supplement the scarce funds available to public education. The funds raised by APMs were used to maintain the physical facilities of schools, to buy instructional materials, and support the attendance of poor students through providing clothing and personal learning materials. The rapid expansion of the Brazilian

public educational system was not accompanied by increments in the investments in education, creating the need to rely on alternate sources of funding (Mello, 1994).

It has been argued that the role played by APMs in supplying additional funding for schools was another mechanism through which the historical social inequality among Brazilians was perpetuated.

First of all, APMs charged parents a 'voluntary contribution fee' which in some cases was actually compulsory since it was required for students' enrollment. Students whose parents could not afford to pay the fee were not admitted under excuses of no vacancies, or suffered discrimination from school professionals (Ribeiro, 1989).

Secondly, schools located in middle class neighborhoods were able to raise higher financial contributions, affording significant improvements which could not be achieved by schools located in poor areas. Thus, even when attending public schools supposed to be equally financed by the State, Brazilian students had unequal access to educational resources (Sposito, 1989).

Paradoxically, in some regions the APMs instigated parents and community members to participate, in the form of protest, in schools. An interesting documented case happened in the 1970's in east region of the city of São Paulo. A group of parents refused to pay APM's fees arguing that they were not legal and demanded explanations from the principal. After hearing from the principal how the funds were spent and how indispensable they were to school functioning, parents decided to create a committee to work in partnership with the principal. The committee demanded equal decision power on how the funds would be allocated and full participation in discussions to improve the quality of education. This was a seminal act of an important and well organized social movement

which congregated many citizens in the struggle for better life conditions in the periphery of São Paulo (Campos, 1985).

The general perception is, however, that APMs only allowed for controlled and manipulated participation and did not accomplish any genuine parental involvement in substantive educational matters. (Demo, 1996; Cizesky, 1997; Paro, 1997). In the few places where a significant number of parents did participate the only tangible outcome seems to have been a greater public awareness of the appalling conditions of public schools located in impoverished areas (Sposito, 1989).

### **School Councils in Brazilian Public Schools**

While APMs were still in existence, another form of community participation began to be organized in public schools. The **School Councils** were gradually implemented and assumed different characteristics depending on the political orientation of the state and/or municipal government. While operating for over 20 years in some states, School Councils, or Collegiates, are still in the process of being implemented in some regions of the country (Cizesky, 1997).

The creation of the School Councils is historically associated with the Brazil's political democratization process after the 18-year of military dictatorship (1963-1981). The idea of Popular Councils participating in the elaboration and implementation of social policies was a long defended proposal of progressive parties (Gadotti, 1997; Demo, 1996).

The School Council is a body formed by representatives of all segments of the school community: parents, students, teachers, principals and other school workers. The

role of School Councils can be consultative, deliberative, normative and fiscal (Gadotti & Romão, 1997).

The School Councils were initially created to provide an instance of consultation to the principal, in an effort to democratize the power over important decisions on the functioning of schools and the quality of education provided. The idea was to counterbalance the superficiality of fund-raising activities performed by APMs with a modality of more substantial and meaningful participation for parents and community members (Ribeiro, 1989).

Over the years parents and other members of the community, including teachers, started demanding the right to share deliberation power with the principal. In São Paulo in 1984, the deliberative capacity of the School Councils was finally sanctioned, as the result of a difficult political struggle in which the support of teachers' association was decisive (Ribeiro, 1989).

Teachers, who had initially supported the implementation of School Councils as a strategy to gain more power over issues which directly influenced their professional activities, eventually resented sharing power with parents and students, who they considered non-qualified to decide on educational issues. Tensions resulting from this resentment on the part of teachers, and hesitation to give up decision power by principals, still constitute significant barriers to the participation of parents and community members at Brazilian schools. In fact, positive experiences of School Councils around the country seem to depend on good personal and professional relationships established between parents and school principals (Paro, 1997).

It is important to emphasize that School Councils are not mandatory in all Brazilian schools, and they may assume different forms depending on the political orientation of the



municipality. Their legal base stands upon a broad recommendation on the National Constitution (Art. 204), which assures “the right of the people to participate in the elaboration and control of social policies in all levels” (Nogueira, 1993, p.79). More specifically, the new educational law (LDB/1996, Art. 12) attributes to schools the responsibility of articulation with families and the community, and the implementation of processes of integration between the school and the society (PRASEM, 1998).

The current educational legislation and federal policies also stimulate the creation of School Councils in order to put into practice the principle of ‘democratic school management’. There are financial benefits for which schools may apply that require the existence of an operating School Council (PRASEM, 1997). But it is up to the municipalities, invested with great autonomy to define the instances of participation in schools, to elaborate the norms and to guide the implementation of School Councils.

Therefore, there is great variability in the form and effectiveness of School Councils among different municipalities across the country. A study conducted by the Paulo Freire Institute in São Paulo found that Schools Councils co-exist with different forms of participation in public schools (School Cashiers, APMs and Mothers’ Club) and in many municipalities they do not have deliberative power. According to the study, parents’ effective participation in School Councils is hindered by negative attitudes of school personnel towards sharing power over important decisions and by the reluctance of parents to assume a more pro-active role in schools (Gadotti, 1997; Cizesky & Romão, 1997).

### III.3- The Regional Research Context

In face of the sharp differences among Brazilian geographic regions it is important to provide a brief description of the region where the study was conducted.

Rio Grande do Sul is a state located on the southern border of the country, next to Argentina and Uruguay. According to the Human Development Report of 1996 it is the state with the highest overall human development index (HDI=0,871) in Brazil. In general, there is balance between the economic and social indicators in the state, which indicates an even distribution of resources among the population (PNUD/IPEA, 1996).

Porto Alegre is the capital of the state and has 1.286 million inhabitants. The social indicators are considered high: 91% of the population is literate, life expectancy is 70, 3 years, child mortality is 18 per 1000 inhabitants, and the per capita annual income US\$ 6,477 higher than the national average of US\$ 5,430 (PMPA, 1999).

The city has 471 schools to serve the 302,689 student population: 257 are state schools, 134 private schools, 3 federal schools and 89 are municipal schools. Currently, the number of students enrolled in municipal schools is 46,345 and they offer primarily elementary education (1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade).

In addition to its good economic and educational performance, Porto Alegre was considered one of the cities with the highest quality of life in Brazil (IPEA, 1998). The municipal government is receiving media attention for selecting social investments as government priorities, which is consistent with the political orientation of the current city administration (Pinto, 1994).

## **The Local Political Environment**

Porto Alegre is the only state capital in Brazil which has been administered by a left wing party for three consecutive terms (1989-1999). The main feature of the progressive administration is the use of a participatory approach in the design and implementation of social policies. Citizens are strongly stimulated to participate in all levels of decision making, through mechanisms of direct participation inserted in the regime of representative democracy existent in the municipality. The intensity and consistency of the political orientation towards participation is unique among Brazilian municipalities. Other progressive administrations have implemented participatory approaches but these were discontinued due to political changes (see P.L.Wong's study on the interruption of Paulo Freire's work in São Paulo).

In 1989, the candidate of the Workers' Party (PT) was elected as City Mayor in Porto Alegre and began extensive social reforms which were to be implemented over the following years. The reform was conceived to accomplish what was called a 'radical democracy', in which traditional mechanisms of popular participation in representative democracy would be complemented by mechanisms of direct democracy (Azevedo, 1997). This means that several modalities of popular participation were created in an effort to make the decision making in the public administration a collective and democratic process (da Silva, 1997; Azevedo, 1998).

One of the major mechanisms created by the PT's administration was the Orçamento Participativo (OP) [Participatory Budget], a historical experiment to engage citizens in the decision of how municipal funds would be allocated. In order to organize the process of popular participation several mechanisms were created: a) the Popular Councils organized to discuss local priorities for public investments; b) the thematic meetings to

debate on public policy themes such as transportation, social welfare, education, leisure and economic development; and c) the Orçamento Participativo Council, formed by government experts and representatives which is responsible for elaborating the public investment plan for the next fiscal year (Genro & Souza, 1997).

The implementation of the Orçamento Participativo (OP) was not without problems, and it faced several difficulties related to mismanagement, lack of participation from community members and political disputes with local politicians who resisted the idea of losing power over important decisions about public investments (Genro & Souza, 1997). The OP process was gradually improved over the consecutive terms of the Workers' Party in the municipal administration and has been established as the cornerstone of the progressive administration.

Through the Orçamento Participativo (OP) important decisions in public education have been taken such as where and how to build new schools in the city, and what investments should be made in the educational system. Recently, the process of the OP has been expanded to the municipal educational system through the creation of a specific process of planning, presentation of proposals, and distribution of financial resources among municipal schools.

### **Local Educational Initiatives**

Education is considered one of the top priorities of the municipal government and several initiatives are being implemented in order to accomplish the goal of quality public education for all students at the municipality.

Although still not serving the majority of the student population, the municipal school system is in rapid expansion: in 1995 there were only 22 schools run by the

municipality and by 1998 this number rose to 89 schools. During the same time span initial enrollment rose from 13,367 to 49,673 students (PMPA, 1999).

The major political/pedagogical proposal of the Municipal Department of Education is called *Escola Cidadã* [The Citizen School], and it aims at 'reinventing' the school along three dimensions: the democratization of the access to schooling, participatory school management, and a critical discussion of curriculum and pedagogic practices at schools. The ideological basis of this proposal comes from the work of Paulo Freire, and it conceives education as a means to promote active citizenship for sustainable development (Azevedo, 1997; Gadotti & Romão, 1997).

Teachers in municipal schools participate in training workshops on a systematic basis and receive higher salaries than teachers working in state funded schools. For this reason, there is a very competitive process of selection to hire new teachers for municipal schools. The major criteria for selection in the grade rank is a written exam, open to all eligible candidates, but participation in community activities such as School Councils and Participatory Budget committees adds extra points in the analysis of candidates' resumé.

The major educational initiative during the first term of the progressive administration in Porto Alegre (1989-1992) was to identify, and modify, pedagogical practices which were failing to promote the school learning of large number of students. At the time, grade repetition rates at municipal schools were approximately 20% and educators begun to be mobilized to seek alternatives to improve the effectiveness of schools.

In 1993, when the second PT's term begun, a new participatory process was devised in order to design and implement educational reforms. It was called *Constituinte Escolar* [School Constituency] and it consisted of engaging all segments of the school community (school administrators, teachers, parents and students) in the discussion of the educational

reform to be implemented in municipal schools. During 18 months discussions groups were held at the school level, at regional meetings, and finally at a general assembly to debate three main questions: a) What school do we have? b) What school do we want to have? and c) How do we get to the school we want to have?

The discussion groups at the school level elected representatives to attend both the regional meetings and the general assembly. The regional meetings were organized around four major themes: curriculum and knowledge, school management, evaluation, and social norms. Each of these themes generated concrete proposals to be implemented at the schools.

Of particular interest for the present study are the proposals which stemmed from the theme of school management. The School Constituency reaffirmed the commitment to consolidate participatory mechanisms in municipal schools such as: direct elections for principal and vice-principal in which parents, students and all other school professionals are entitled to vote; popular commissions which decide the distributions of enrollments across the system; the decentralization of financial resources for the implementation of autonomous projects by each school; and full deliberative power to School Councils, which became the highest governing body in municipal schools (Azevedo, 1998).

### **Schools Councils in Porto Alegre**

The School Councils are the major institutional mechanism for community participation at municipal schools. Officially sanctioned in 1993, the School Councils are formed by the principal, representatives of parents, school professionals, and students; all elected for a two-year term. The numerical representation of each group depends on the

number of students enrolled at the school (as shown in Table 1), but parity is ensured between the categories teachers/school professionals and parents/students.

**Table 1: Number of Representatives in School Councils**

# students	Number of Representatives in the School Council					
	Teachers	Parents	Students	Personnel	Principal	Total
till 100	01	01	01	01	01	05
100-500	02	02	01	01	01	07
501-1000	04	03	02	01	01	11
1001-2000	05	04	03	02	01	15
2001-3000	07	05	04	02	01	19
3001-	08	06	04	02	01	21

Source: Lei Complementar No. 292, Conselhos Escolares. SMED, 1993

The School Councils are expected to function as an auxiliary board to the principal for the management of the school. Differently from other regions of the country where the School Councils perform only a consultative role, in Porto Alegre Councils have legal support to decide on administrative, financial and pedagogic issues at schools.

In order to prepare all representatives of School Councils to perform such an important role, the Department of Education promotes systematic meetings and conferences during which key school issues are discussed. Another unique feature of School Councils in Porto Alegre is that they may elaborate their own internal rules, provided that the attributions of the general law (Lei Complementar No 292, 1993) are respected. This

feature is consistent with the guideline of promoting the autonomy of schools, and as a consequence there is a great diversity in the way School Councils operate in municipal schools.

The School Councils were devised to allow the participation of different segments of the school community, and it is thus expected that the representatives of each of these segments will promote opportunities for discussion with the group that they represent. Parents' representatives are expected to mobilize all parents at the school to discuss important issues and bring their decisions to the School Council.

However, a critical review of how School Councils are operating in municipal schools in Porto Alegre shows that there is great heterogeneity on the level and extent to which effective participation is indeed happening. In certain schools School Councils are merely bureaucratic structures and the principal continues to be in charge of all administrative and pedagogical matters. In others, the representatives of School Council are quite active but neglect to systematically consult the members who they are supposed to represent, turning their participation into a personal and isolated event.

Nevertheless, School Councils are being gradually consolidated as the main modality of participation in municipal schools. According to professionals at the Department of Education, parents' attendance in city-wide meetings of School Council representatives has been increasingly higher and their participation has been notably more effective. Several parent representatives have been reelected for consecutive terms, and thus are better prepared to perform their role in the management of schools.

Meanwhile, other forms of participation continue to exist in municipal schools. In some schools there are Mothers' Clubs, a group created to organize mothers' activities in the school, and organizations similar to the former Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPMs).



In summary, the historical background and the present context of parental participation in municipal schools in Porto Alegre seem to constitute a rich and interesting environment to investigate any effects of the experience of participation on parents. The consistency and intensity of the participation are expected to provide information-rich cases from which evidence of effects of participation on the lives of citizens could be drawn. One of the major challenges was to carefully design the study in order to select data collection instruments and data analysis procedures which would reliably capture that evidence.

## **IV- The Study- Design and Methods**

### **IV.1- The Research Questions**

The study was conducted as a small-scale qualitative case study, privileging information on processes and perceptions gathered through direct observations, focus group discussions and systematic interviewing (Merriam, 1988; Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1997).

The research questions were derived from four main themes:

*The contexts of participation: How is parents' participation organized in the two schools ?*

*Effects of participation: What effects of the experience of participation are reported by parents?*

*Conditions for generation of effects: What elements/aspects of participation do parents associate with the generation of reported effects?*

*Implications of reported effects: What are the implications of reported effects for individual/family and community development?*

## IV.2- Data Collection Strategies

The first research question, a general description of the contexts of participation in the two schools, was addressed through a 'pre-structured case study' (Miles, 1990). The outline for data collection included topics related to the political environment, the formal and informal aspects of the institutional modalities for parental participation in the two schools, as well as the social relationships established for and from participation among parents and between parents and school professionals.

Information to elaborate the descriptions of the contexts of participation came from multiple sources: direct observations at schools, attendance to School Council meetings, field notes, interviews with principals and with other important stakeholders at the schools and at the Municipal Department of Education, and focus group discussions with mothers and teachers from each school.

The focus groups constituted a particularly rich opportunity to investigate the diversity of perspectives around the theme of participation within and between the schools. It also provided crucial information on the 'micro-politics' of participation, which showed how the power and influence over school decisions were distributed across the different actors (Anderson, 1998).

The second research question, which aimed at capturing what effects, if any, parents attributed to their experience of participation was addressed mainly by interviews. The initial idea was to interview several family members in order to investigate their perceptions of the effects of participation. In reality, however, interviews were conducted only with mothers for two reasons: first, only mothers participated in formal modalities of participation in the two selected schools; and second, fathers and other family members

were not informed of the activities and kind of involvement mothers had at the school. The cultural context associated with gender specific participation in schools has been briefly introduced and will be addressed later in the discussion of the findings.

The interviews were conducted according to the model of the 'three-interview series' proposed by Seidman (1991) which allowed for in-depth interviewing and encouraged the participants to reconstruct their experience of participation at the school. Although each interview had a primary focus, they did not follow a rigid protocol and were conducted following what Patton (1990) described as 'the general interview guide' approach. The idea was to encourage mothers to reflect on the experience of participation and identify what kind of effects, if any, it had generated. The interviews took place at the school and at the home of the participants in three different time periods: November 1998, December, 1998 and March, 1999.

The intervals between the interviews proved to be an excellent strategy for improving the quality of the data collected. The two first interviews were used to establish rapport between the researcher and the participants, to collect general information about the experience of participation and to stimulate mothers to reflect about possible effects of participation on their lives. The third interview focused on the reported effects and on conditions/elements associated with their generation. The two-month interval between the second and third interview allowed for a preliminary analysis of the data collected and an opportunity to check meanings and initial interpretations in collaboration with participants.

It is interesting to note that for some mothers the interviews seemed to constitute the first opportunity to reflect on the effects associated with their experience of participation. Mothers could promptly respond to questions on why they thought it was important to participate, generally using jargon learned from school professionals, but were reticent

about effects generated for them and their families. Further evidence that the theme of participation was not the target of any previous reflection was the fact that mothers were gradually more able to discuss it, and willing to offer insights during the course of the interviews.

At this point an important validity issue was introduced. It may be argued that the researcher has induced the mothers to associate effects to their experiences of participation by asking direct questions about it. This validity threat was foreseen in the design of the study, particularly because it addresses an issue of social desirability, i.e., mothers are exposed to a strong social discourse on positive effects of participation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Weiss, 1994). Two sources of evidence may be used to refute this validity threat: first, several mothers repeatedly alternated positive and negative effects of participation in their reports, showing that no a priori value was guiding their reflection; second, the effects reported by mothers were accompanied by concrete examples of how they affected different aspects of their lives, making it implausible that they were theoretically constructed or externally induced.

The two final research questions were addressed in the analysis of the data collected through the interviews. Mothers were asked to describe what conditions and elements were important for the generation of the effects of participation they reported and what were the implications of these effects in the personal lives, for their families and for the community in general.

### **IV.3-Sampling**

One of the basic premises of the study was that parents needed to have experienced at least one form of institutionalized participation in a public school, over a period of at least two years, in order to be able to perceive effects deriving from this experience (Salisbury, 1984). The sampling process was purposeful and criterion-based (Patton, 1990), looking for sites where institutionalized forms of participation in schools were available and parents were consistently participating in them. Therefore, the sampling process looked for 'information-rich cases' (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and involved three levels of selection: the municipality, the schools and parents.

#### **The Municipality:**

Porto Alegre is one Brazilian municipality where participation in public schools has been strong and consistently supported for the past 10 years. The municipal government has encouraged social participation in all types of public institutions, and some schools located in low-income neighborhoods have experienced increased family participation in management, curricular and other educational reforms (Costa & Mandel, 1997; CENPEC, 1993). The consistency of the political orientation towards participatory reforms in public schools over an extended period of time was the determinant factor in the selection of the municipality as the site of the study.

## **The Schools**

Initially designed to provide a description of the context of participation in only one school, the study was expanded to include the contexts of two different schools located in the same geographical area of the city of Porto Alegre.

The dramatic differences between the contexts of parent participation in the two schools was the underlying factor which guided the decision to include the second school in the sample. Although the inclusion of another school did not ascribe a comparative nature to the study, it allowed for the investigation of a broader range of conditions and practices that parents experience in schools as well as an exploration of a wider range of effects which are perceived to be associated with these experiences.

The selection of School 1 went through the following stages. A representative of the Municipal Department of Education provided a list of 5 schools in which parent participation was considered most active. Three schools were contacted and access was granted to two of them. School 1 was selected due to the fact that it possessed two different institutionalized modalities of participation: the Mothers' Club and the School Council. School 2 was suggested by another researcher who was working in the school, and a mother who lived in the community where the school is located. The proximity of the two schools created several connections between them: students often change from one school to the other and several mothers have participated in both schools.

## **The Mothers**

Altogether the sample was comprised of 15 mothers who are, or have been, participating in a formal modality of participation at the schools for the last two years.

The selection of parents was made from the list of participants in the formal modalities of parental participation at the schools during the two preceding years. The list contained the names of the most active parents, defined by the longest time of participation, regular attendance to meetings and school events, and formal positions held at different modalities of participation.

In School 1, from a list of 10 parents who fulfilled the above criteria, 8 mothers were contacted and interviewed. The group of mothers included the 5 current parental representatives at the School Council (who are also members of the Mothers' Club) and 3 mothers who participate only at the Mothers' Club.

In School 2, from a 10-name list, 7 mothers were located and agreed to participate in the study. Two of the mothers are currently parental representatives at the School Council and 5 were members of the Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM) which functioned at the school for 8 years and was closed one year before the study was conducted.

It is important to acknowledge that this criterion-based sampling imposed limitations on the generalization of the findings, even to other parents in the selected schools who do not present high levels of participation. The logic behind this selection process was to identify parents whose participation was publicly acknowledged and who were involved in the formal modalities of participation offered at municipal schools. This would be, hypothetically, the group of parents for whom participation would generate the most intense and recognizable effects.

#### **IV.4- Data Analysis Process**

The complexity of the contexts of participation in the two schools, the heterogeneity among mothers, and the use of multiple data collection strategies generated an extensive and diverse body of data which required a carefully sequenced process of data analysis.

The process of data analysis went through the following stages:

##### **Data organization and reduction**

During this initial stage, field notes were typed, interview tapes were transcribed and information about the schools and mothers collected through different data collection strategies were organized under the broad themes of the case study outline and in a file for individual mothers.

##### **Elaboration of the Descriptions of the Contexts of Participation and the Profiles**

The first analytical step consisted of the description of the contexts of participation in the two selected schools. The case outline contained themes related to the political environment, the main features of the modalities of participation and the social relationships established for and from participation. The descriptions were elaborated through an iterative process, intertwining a macro and micro perspective, i.e., they include data collected at the Municipal Department of Education, the perspectives of the principals in both schools, the view of the professionals (teachers, counselors and supervisors) and the parents. The descriptions were also enriched by data obtained through the interviews with mothers and through the observations during the time spent at both schools.

Data on individual mothers was organized into 'Profiles'. These profiles summarized all important information on personal characteristics and experiences of each participant mother and included verbatim statements to illustrate mothers' points of view



(Seidman, 1997). Information to elaborate the profiles was obtained through personal interviews and through observations of mothers' behavior at meetings and other activities at the school.

Besides the profiles, data on mothers in each school was organized into two tables: one which summarizes the demographic information, and another which summarizes the most important features of mothers' participation at the schools.

### **Identification of the effects reported by each mother**

The identification of effects of participation reported by mothers was performed based on complete interview transcripts. At this initial stage, effects were broadly defined as results, benefits, lessons, feelings, changes in perception of self and of the school environment which mothers attributed to their experience of participation. For each mother a list of all reported effects was elaborated, along with verbatim excerpts of the transcripts in which the effects were most clearly cited.

The next analytical step involved the elaboration of a list of all reported effects by mothers. The effects were then loosely grouped according to similarities in their content and domain. For example, mothers' reports on learning broader vocabulary or how to take notes during a meeting were grouped together, as well as reports on feeling good about herself or having fun being around peers. At this point of the analysis, mothers' profiles were crucial in helping to keep the effects grounded to their original context and meaning.

The several groups of effects were then analyzed in terms of their unifying meaning and content. From this analysis four broad categories of effects emerged: personal enhancement and well being, acquisition of knowledge and skills, expansion of social

networks, and the downside of participation, a category under which all negative effects reported by mothers were organized.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

Findings of the study are presented in different forms in order to explore a broader range of analytical perspectives which could inform the research questions.

Firstly, a description of the contexts of participation is presented along with indications of how general aspects of mothers' participation at the schools may be linked to the effects they report as a group. The description of the contexts of participation aims at setting the stage which will constitute the background of mothers' activities and interactions while participating at the schools.

Secondly, data on the mothers is presented focusing on who they are, how and why they got involved at the school, what they actually do/did at school and what effects of participation they report. The goal of providing individualized accounts of each mother was to highlight individual differences under a collective experience, i. e., to investigate the diversity in mothers' perceptions of self and the others regarding the meaning and effects of the experience of participating at the school.

## **V-The Contexts of Participation**

The two schools included in the study are located in the periphery of the city of Porto Alegre and their surrounding neighborhoods are formed by working class and medium and low-income residents. Both communities are well served by public transportation and residents have easy access to basic social services.

Although under the same political orientation and located in communities with similar socio-economic characteristics, the contexts for parent participation provided in the Neighborhood<sup>1</sup> and Quarter schools are dramatically different. Both schools belong to the NAI 2 (Núcleo de Ação Integrada) and thus receive guidance and supervision from the same team of professionals at the Municipal Department of Education. The most visible difference between the schools is that while in the Neighborhood School there are two formal modalities of parent participation, in the Quarter School there is only one, the School Council, in which parents have been consistently under-represented.

### **V.1.-The Neighborhood School (School 1)**

The Neighborhood school was created in 1988 to function as a CIEM (Centro Integrado de Educação Municipal), a municipal school which provided full-time school shifts. In the following year however, the municipal administration changed and turned the school into a regular, 4-hour shift school (School Social-Anthropological Report, 1998). Currently the school has 747 students enrolled from kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, in morning and afternoon shifts, 54 teachers and 2 school pedagogical supervisors.

The Neighborhood School is located in a pleasant neighborhood and is a relatively well-kept facility. The school has established active partnerships with other community organizations such as the Community Center, a human services NGO, Residents' Associations of three communities, the local church and the committees for the Participatory Budget (OP). During weekends, the school is often open to community members for the leisure and educational activities.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the schools and all participants in the study are fictitious in order to preserve their anonymity.

The Neighborhood School possesses some features that distinguish it from other municipal schools and that creates the impression of a vibrant and organized school. Among these features are: a) the existence of a nutrition department responsible for the meals served at the cafeteria and for integrating health issues into the formal curriculum; b) a vegetable garden used to provide vegetables for the school and for learning activities with the students; c) a school band financed after the school won a competitive selection of school projects at the Department of Education; d) a computer center with classes for students, school professionals and community members; e) a student council (Grêmio) which organizes and promotes students' activities; and f) an active Mothers' Club, a mothers' organization inside the school.

The current principal was elected by the school community four years ago, and one of her main campaign promises was to create a Mothers' Club, a place where mothers could gather and participate more actively in the school's life. The principal has been reelected for her second consecutive term, based on the platform of 'good and close community relations'. The Mothers' Club and the School Council constitute the two main modalities of parental participation in the school. Besides these forms, parents are invited to school meetings every three months to discuss their children's academic progress and to attend lectures or other thematic meetings on a systematic basis.

### **V.1.1- Formal Modalities of Parent Participation in the Neighborhood School**

#### **Mothers' Club**

Mothers' Clubs are an under-researched form of parental participation in Brazilian schools. Professionals at the Department of Education were not able to provide the exact numbers of Mothers' Clubs currently existing in municipal schools, nor the process through which they are created. Literature on this form of participation was not found, although several Brazilian researchers working in the area of participation were consulted. Many of these researchers were aware of the existence of Mothers' Clubs in public schools but could not provide any indication of the legal basis or normative guidelines that legitimate their functioning.

The Mothers' Club in the Neighborhood School was created in 1996 right after the current principal was elected. The principal reported that she wanted to work closely with the mothers, and the motto of her campaign was to work with and for the community to make a better school. She came to the school and worked as a teacher for two years before applying to be a principal. She attributes her victory in the elections to the involvement of parents in her campaign, particularly due to her promise of organizing, and formalizing, their participation in the school.

The Mothers' Club is named 'Nascente' [Nascent] and is located in an old remodeled school bathroom. The room has a large table with 12 chairs, a refrigerator and two closets. Club meetings formally happen once a week. During other school days mothers occasionally meet at the Club to perform different activities, such as helping to distribute new books to students and to organize festivities and field trips. The Club has 21

mothers officially enrolled, but mothers report that there is high attrition, and only 8 mothers consistently participate in it.

Mothers develop several kinds of activities at the Club. Every school year, the School Council, in which 5 mothers participate, allocates special funds for the Club's activities. Mothers need to submit an activity plan and its respective budget to be approved by the School Council. Funds for any other activity to be developed by the Club, particularly social events, need to be raised by the mothers.

During last two years, mothers have had several workshops to learn handicrafts taught by members of the community. They report that they like to learn these skills to make products for their family and eventually sell them in order to make extra income. Since 1997, members of the Club may take free computer classes at the school lab, although only 2 are currently enrolled.

Besides its own agenda, the Club works in close collaboration with school professionals on daily school activities. Often mothers of the Club are invited to help in the library, to distribute informational materials at the school and to talk to other mothers about specific school issues. Club members also play an important role in the planning and organization of all school festivities and community events, and are sometimes hired to perform small jobs at the school, such as making the cafeteria's new curtains.

In order to investigate the dynamic and social interactions established by mothers at the Club a focus group discussion was conducted. Ten mothers were present: the eight who constitute the core group of the Club, one new-comer, and another mother who had not been in the Club for several months.

Mothers started the discussion reporting the wonderful trip they had gone on in the previous week to a nearby city, in which the principal and the vice-principal also

participated. Mothers reported several episodes which denoted personal proximity with the two school professionals, such as jokes of which they were both the author and the target. The discussion then moved to the theme of mothers' participation in the school and gradually became tense as different perspectives were exposed. After a formal discourse on the importance of parental participation in the school (in which mothers utilized professional jargon and rational explanations), three main reasons that motivated mothers to start participating could be identified: a) a commitment to ensure that their children receive a good education, b) to make new friends and socialize; and c) to collaborate with school professionals due to gratitude for previous favors received or a sense of duty and commitment to public affairs.

The preliminary analysis of the Mothers' Club as an authentic form of parental participation in the school was worrisome. The Mothers' Club seemed to constitute a patronizing form of participation created and supported by the principal to control the activities of mothers at the school. It was particularly disturbing to hear from mothers at the Club that their group was perceived as difficult to join, and totally loyal to the principal and other school professionals. The kind of activities and training workshops developed at the Club, manual skills and traditional female tasks, also corroborated the idea of a conservative and condescending form of parent participation.

However, a more in-depth exploration of the activities of the Club and the perspective of its members provided a more complex and multi-dimensional description of this form of participation. During an interview the principal expressed her concern about the kinds of activities mothers were developing at the Club. Her challenge has been how to maintain the autonomy of the Club while at the same time encouraging mothers to look for

the acquisition of more market-oriented/personal development skills which could have greater impact in their lives.

Among the mothers at the Club important dissonance surfaced regarding the attitude towards the principal and teachers. Beneath the blind loyalty and subordination to the principal and teachers attributed to members of the Club, there were many different ways of confronting the authority figures at the school. Some mothers preferred to talk to the principal when they saw something wrong; others talked directly to the teachers. In fact, many mothers reported conflicts between themselves and teachers which, according to them, were solved through dialogue and mutual respect. Members of the Club reported knowing better than other parents the negative aspects of school functioning, but also feel they understand better how complex things are and how to look for solutions.

From the perspective of teachers and school professionals (counselors and supervisors) mothers of the Club walk a thin line, not always knowing the limits of their appropriate participation. They reported cases where mothers interfered inside classrooms and teachers had to take a firm position and asked them to leave. Some teachers felt that mothers had neither the right, nor the ability to supervise their work. But teachers also mentioned that members of the Club are willing to help and many times have facilitated teachers' jobs. Several close friendships between mothers, teachers and school professionals were reported, along with a high level of interaction between the two groups. School professionals said they were always open to talk to all parents but admitted that they had more intense contact with mothers from the Club.

In general, mothers referred to their participation in the Club as a highly positive experience. They emphasized the important contribution of the Club in breaking the social isolation of domestic life; and the opportunity to obtain emotional support in the face of



personal and family problems. The meetings in the Club also have allowed mothers to discuss important child-rearing issues and the school learning process of their children. Every time a mother brought up a problem involving the learning process of one child the matter would be discussed by the mothers, and eventually the principal or the teachers would be invited to join them.

Mothers also mentioned the opportunity the Club offered for preparing them for other forms of participation. The current president of the Club is a member of the School Council and the treasurer says that next year she will be 'ready' to join the Council since she still needs to learn the 'tricks of the trade'. When asked what would happen if the principal decided to terminate the Club, they all said that they would not allow that to happen, that now they feel they have the right to be actively participating in the school.

In summary, despite some features that suggest a highly structured and personal form of participation, the Mothers' Club seems to provide an important opportunity for personal development for some participating mothers. A closer examination of who these mothers are and the effects they associate with their experience of participation will further illuminate this question.

### **School Council in the Neighborhood School**

The School Council in the Neighborhood school is formed by the principal, the vice-principal, 2 school counselors, 2 teachers and 5 mothers. According to the number of students enrolled at the school, the Council should have only 3 parents' representatives, but the principal authorized the inclusion of two additional mothers.

The Council is structured following the guidelines of the Department of Education and constitutes the highest deliberative body at the school. All important decisions

regarding the allocation of funds, pedagogic innovations, and disciplinary matters have to be brought forward for the Council's deliberation.

Meetings are held once a month and may happen any time an important decision has to be made. It is expected that before each major decision the representatives of each segment (teachers, students, parents, school professionals and staff) meet and decide their position to be brought to the Council. In reality, few decisions undergo this process. The representatives usually make decisions according to their opinions, and only major issues are discussed or communicated in larger meetings.

Observations during a School Council meeting revealed some features of its dynamics. The meeting was held in the teacher's conference room, where all school staff meetings take place. The principal proposed the major topics to be discussed, although she had previously submitted the agenda for approval and incorporated a new topic suggested by a mother. After several bureaucratic matters which were discussed without the active participation of the mothers, the principal introduced the topic on the funds to be allocated to the Mothers' Club. Based on the budget submitted the previous year, the principal had calculated a certain amount, which the mothers considered too low. As a response to an excited and angry reaction from mothers demanding more funds for the Club, the principal reminded the mothers that they would need to prepare a more detailed activity plan in order to get additional funds. Through an amused, though quite revealing, comment the principal said - "We created the Club to bring money to the school...and now all they (mothers) do is ask for more money". The matter was settled with the promise of the elaboration of another activity plan with the help of the principal and vice-principal.

The discussion at the meeting proceeded to include academic matters (election of the best class), extra-curricular activities (funds and uniforms for the school band) and the

creation of class representatives so that students could participate more actively in the life of the school. Mothers participated quite actively in the discussion. More experienced mothers (those with the longest history of participation) had a more proactive role than the ones with a more recent involvement.

According to teachers and school professionals the School Council is working well at the Neighborhood School, although the principal still holds the power over the most important decisions. They feel that some mothers are more prepared than others to participate in the Council, but all have given important contributions to solve problems at the school.

Mothers reported that they feel respected and valued at the Council, while admitting that they sometimes cannot give an informed opinion on bureaucratic and academic matters. They reported that the training workshops held at the Department of Education for parents have provided a valuable learning opportunity on how to participate effectively in the School Council.

A concern arises in relation to the elections for the representatives of the Council. Some mothers are already in their second term and should leave the Council in the next election. The prospective parents' representatives are all members of the Mother's Club, suggesting that in the Neighborhood School, although parent participation is reportedly producing positive outcomes, it may be limited to a circumscribed number of mothers.

## **V.2- The Quarter School (School 2)**

Founded in 1987, the Quarter school is surrounded by a housing complex with 312 buildings and 4,992 apartments where approximately 30,000 people live.

After the contractor declared bankruptcy in April 1987, the housing complex was invaded by prospective owners and people who could not find other low cost living options in the city (Costa, 1998). The new residents found the buildings without utilities: no running water, no electricity, no windows. Each family took one apartment and formed committees to negotiate their permanence with government officials and to demand basic infra-structure and social services.

This historical background is important in order to understand the community context of the Quarter School. Initially built as part of an urbanization plan for a new area of the city, the school suddenly began enrolling the children of the families who were considered the 'squatters' i.e. people who were illegal residents of the housing complex.

Moreover, there was enormous competition for school places since there were more students to be enrolled than initially planned. Sometimes families had to wait months on a waiting list in order for their children to be admitted. Mothers who were interviewed reported that many families felt they were not welcomed in the school and that school professionals were suspicious of them.

The school currently has 1,425 students and 105 teachers enrolled, in morning and afternoon shifts. In the evenings, the school is occupied by the adult literacy project of the municipal Department of Education (SEJA). The general environment is that of a big school, located in an unsafe urban neighborhood: high walls and fences, locked gate and limited access for unauthorized community members.

While field work was being conducted, the Quarter School held elections for principal. During an interview, the former principal admitted that she had neglected family participation in the school, and only a few parents participated in a rather passive way. She argued that she had had so many internal problems that it was difficult to promote more active participation of parents in the school. As her major achievement, she reported the construction of a higher wall around the school's backyard which prevented drug dealers and other criminals from contacting students inside the school. She was not re-elected due to the massive votes of older students and parents for the other candidate, whose campaign emphasized tougher disciplinary measures and more professional control at the school.

The newly elected principal was evasive when interviewed about her plans to stimulate parent participation in the school. She believes that their participation in the School Council is 'sufficient', but she is willing to consider other modalities to make parents more involved in their children's education. When told that some mothers were considering creating a Mothers' Club at the school she was surprised and reacted negatively. She said: "I have to see, nobody will create anything if I don't want...I have to investigate if that is legal.....I know nothing about that and these mothers will need to talk to me."

At the present moment, only one institutional modality of parental participation is available at the school: the School Council. Until 1997, the school had a Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM), the local version of Associations of Parents and Teachers (APMs). Five out of the seven mothers interviewed in the Quarter school participated in the school's CPM before its termination, and therefore a description of this modality of participation will be provided.

## **V.2.1- Formal Modalities of Parent Participation in the Quarter School**

### **The Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM) at the Quarter School**

The Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM ) was created soon after the Quarter School was founded and functioned like the traditional parent and teacher associations (APMs) in Brazilian schools. Its major function was to raise funds for the school, which were used to replace broken windows, to buy fans for classrooms, and to buy learning materials for students who could not afford them.

Although all parents were invited to join the CPM during general meetings, mothers who actually joined it were the ones personally invited by the principal, a teacher, or another school professional.

Mothers organized several activities to raise money for the school. They created a place to sell snacks during recess, recycled clothes and household utilities to sell in a bazaar, organized field trips, sold food and hand made products at parties and festivities. They also held workshops, in which mothers or teachers volunteered to teach manual skills.

The CPM charged a fee to each family in the school. The fee was not compulsory and mothers reported that only approximately half of the families paid it on a consistent basis. Mothers participating in the CPM had no formal involvement with any other school matter, rather than the ones for which their financial contribution was asked. Although the principal and some teachers participated in the CPM, mothers had no access to information on the decision-making processes at the school.

Paradoxically, four of the mothers interviewed felt that they shared power with school personnel during the time of the CPM. The fact that they raised the funds desperately needed by the principal to run the school gave them a sense of usefulness and importance. When the school started to receive supplementary funds from the Department of Education, the mothers reported feeling set aside, losing their function and status in the school.

In the perspective of teachers, the CPM constituted a positive mode of parental participation in the schools because parents were circumscribed to the fund-raising and social activities and did not get involved in the pedagogical issues. During the focus group discussion with teachers at the Quarter School, a very conservative view of parental participation in school emerged. As an example, one teacher said:

The good parents are the ones that come to you and say... tell us what to do to help you teach our child... those are parents that trust you totally and let you do what it is best for their children... in this community you don't find many like that... they are not interested in their children... or they come to school to interfere with our work.

The CPM was disbanded in 1997 because, according to one mother, the School Council was created and the school was no longer dependent on the funds raised by the CPM. According to the current principal its termination was due to the fact that parents no longer wanted to participate. The fact is that with the end of the CPM, a considerable decline in parental participation occurred in the school which was not reversed by the implementation of the School Council.

### **The School Council in the Quarter School**

The School Council in the Quarter School is formed by the principal, the Vice-principal, 3 teachers, two school professionals, 2 mothers and 2 students.

According to the number of students enrolled at the school, 4 parent representatives should be part of the Council, but it has been functioning with under-representation from parents and teachers for over a year. The former principal said that two elected parents could not attend Council meetings due to their work schedule, and therefore have given up their participation. She hoped that through the next representatives' elections the vacancies would be filled.

The meetings of the Council at the Quarter School are randomly scheduled; in fact, they are scheduled only when an important decision has to be made, a decision that requires the signatures of members of the Council. Thus, there are periods during the school year when meetings happen every month and other periods when meetings happen every three or four months.

At the first School Council meeting held after the principal's election, the new principal and Vice-principal were absent. Only 3 teachers, 2 staff members (1 cleaner; 1 responsible for the cafeteria), 2 mothers, and 1 student attended. The meeting took place in the school cafeteria, and was interrupted many times by the entrance of students, parents and teachers.

The first topic to be discussed was the result of the recent principal election, and the three teachers and the two mothers stated they would not run for re-election because they did not want to work in collaboration with the new school principal. They expressed being deeply offended by the accusation, made during the campaign, of being 'ghost representatives', i.e., doing nothing on behalf of the school.



The discussion moved to what was expected to be the main topic of the meeting: the Council had to approve a new teachers training plan offered by the Department of Education. Classes would need to be suspended at least on 10 occasions so that teachers could attend the training sessions. Although there was initial agreement on the importance of such training for teachers, one mother raised the problems which would be created for families by having children missing classes so often. The mother's statement was followed by silence and then by total dismissal. The teacher who coordinating the meeting moved on to the next topic, which included some bureaucratic forms to be signed by members of the Council.

The two mothers who participated in the Council reported that they had initial problems in participating because they did not completely understand the topics under discussion. Both said that they have gradually learned, but still have the sense that they do not have control nor any power on how things are decided at the school.

When asked how they communicate with or advise other parents about decisions to be made at the school Council, the two mothers participating in the School Council said they talk informally with other parents at the school gate or when they meet in the community. They have tried to organize formal meetings to discuss specific matters but only a small number of parents came.

According to mothers who have participated in the CPM, and are no longer participating, the School Council is a manipulated form of participation, in which parental representatives are "puppets" in the hands of school professionals. When asked what would be the main difference between the CPM and School Council one mother replied:

At the time of the CPM they (school professionals) had to come to us to ask for help or money...now at the Council they decide how things are going to be...mothers only agree to what they say...I don't like being a puppet like that (M14).

The newly elected principal said that she believed it was important to have the School Council at the school to make the decision-making process more collective and democratic. The underlying assumption of her statement, she later admitted, was that the existence of the Council meant that she would not be held solely responsible for unpopular or controversial decisions over school matters. She also reported that democratic school management is the main guideline from the Department of Education and she will do her best to comply with the guideline. She personally considers, however, that the Quarter School is located in a 'difficult community' and that she needs to think carefully about how to work collaboratively with students and their families.

The general impression is that the School Council in the Quarter School has not been effective in two important dimensions: a) it has not established a truly democratic decision-making process at the school since the principal still detains the power over all important decisions; and b) parents are not provided with the opportunity for an authentic participation since parental representatives in the Council do not have a voice and have not established systematic channels of communication with other parents in order to convey their opinions and interests.

**Table 2- Summary of Differences in the Contexts of Participation**

<b>The Neighborhood School</b>	<b>The Quarter School</b>
<i>Two modalities of participation (Mothers' Club and School Council)</i>	<i>One modality of participation (School Council)</i>
<i>Participating parents satisfied with their experience of participation</i>	<i>Participating mothers feeling manipulated and powerless</i>
<i>Over-representation of mothers in the School Council</i>	<i>Under-representation of mothers at the School Council</i>
<i>Mothers performing a wide range of activities at the school</i>	<i>Mothers participation limited to attendance in School Council meetings</i>
<i>Open school: parents can enter the school at anytime and easily schedule a meeting with school professionals</i>	<i>Locked school: parents only have access to the school with the permission of a school professional</i>
<i>School trying to reach out for the community: open house on Saturdays, school band</i>	<i>School trying to protect itself from the community: building of higher walls, enhancing security system</i>

## **VI- Mothers Who Participate**

### **VI.1- Brazilian Women**

Prior to examining the women who participate in the two schools and were included in the study sample, it is important to briefly describe major demographic characteristics and the general life conditions of women in Brazil.

Gender inequality is not a straightforward issue in Brazil as it is in other developing countries. Girls are enrolled in schools in equal numbers to boys, at all levels, and their academic performance is slightly higher than the boys' (MEC, 1996). This should by no means be interpreted as the existence of gender equity in Brazil. Women's participation in the labor market is significantly lower than men (54.9% and 85.5% respectively), the unemployment rate is higher (8.8%) and they receive lower wages than their male counterparts (IDB, 1998). Although the number of women in the general population is higher than men (a difference of approximately 3 million), only 12% of the candidates for last major political elections were women (IBGE, 1999).

The dynamics of gender inequality in Brazil are deeply influenced by a patriarchal ideology, which in a subtle but pervasive way, dictates that the maternal and domestic responsibilities be considered the most important in women's lives. N. Stromquist (1997), discussing the cultural features that impeded women from participating in literacy programs in Brazil, captured well how gender inequality has been perpetuated in Brazilian society: "This is how patriarchy works today- not attacking gender relations nor presenting specific obstacles to women's participation. It is reproduced by default." (p.221).

The centrality of the traditional feminine role is well represented by women in the sample. All of them are married, currently living with their husbands and children and they

hold no formal employment. Although the structure of the family has been changing over the last decades, the nuclear family with both parents is still the predominant form of social organization in Brazilian society (56.7%). Families with children headed by women are 16.5% of all families in the country, while this figure drops to 13.7% in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (IBGE, 1999).

Table 3 summarizes important demographic information about the women in the sample. More complete tables (tables 5 and 7) describing personal and social characteristics of mothers participating in each school are later presented.

**Table 3- Demographic Characteristics of Women in the Sample**

Participating Women	School 1	School 2
Age	28-44	34-46
Number of children	1-4	2-5
Years of education	5-13	4-12
Occupational status	Homemaker (5/8 informal jobs)	Homemaker (5/7 informal jobs)
Family income	2-12ms*	5-15ms*

\*ms= minimum monthly salary, approximately US\$75

In Table 4 mother’s level of educational attainment and their reported income is compared to city, state and country indicators. Due to the well established relationship between indicators of socio-economic status (SES), such as educational attainment and income, and the type and level of parental participation in schools (Lareau, 1986; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993), it is important to show how women in the sample compare to other Brazilian women along these characteristics.

**Table 4- Comparison of Demographic Characteristics to City, State and Country Indicators**

	School 1	School 2	Sample	City	State	National
Years of schooling/ Women	9.7	7.7	8.7	6.8	6.3	5.6
Family Income	6.8ms	7.1ms	6.9ms	5.7ms	4.5ms	4.3 ms

Source: Síntese de Indicadores Sociais, IBGE, 1998.

The table shows that women participating in each school, and the sample as a whole, possess slightly higher levels of educational attainment and income when compared to other women living in Porto Alegre. The gap is considerable higher when the comparison is between local and national indicators, since the level of literacy and general income of women living in the northeast region is significantly lower than in the south region. Although the attribution of social class is a complex task, particularly in societies marked by dramatic and multi-faceted social inequalities such as Brazil, it is reasonable to state that mothers in the sample belong to a medium social stratum of the Brazilian population.

## **VI.2-Mothers Who Participate in the Neighborhood School**

The eight mothers interviewed in the Neighborhood School currently participate in the Mothers' Club, and five of them also participate at the School Council.

All mothers participating in the Neighborhood School are married and currently living with their husbands. Their level of educational attainment ranges from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to first year of college, and their ages range from 28 to 44 years old. Mothers have from 1-4 children, and at least one of their children is currently attending the elementary school (1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade).

Although the mothers reported holding no formal jobs, five of them are involved in informal income generating activities. These activities are usually part-time and include domestic cleaning, catering services, selling home made products and child care.

The involvement of mothers in these income generating activities does not seem to be directly related to the reported family income (which is actually the formal income of their husbands) nor to their level of educational attainment. It would be expected that mothers with reported higher incomes would be the least involved in activities to provide extra income for their families. This seems not to be the case, since two of the mothers (M5 and M8) with the highest income are involved with informal activities and they have very different levels of educational attainment (8<sup>th</sup> grade and high school graduate respectively). It is important to note that the reported family income refers to husbands' formal salary and does not include extra sources of income in the family.

Based on observations during the interviews, which were mostly conducted at the mothers' house, and on accounts of their living conditions, it is possible to infer that mothers belong to a medium stratum of the Brazilian population. Most of them own a

small house with basic appliances such as television, radio, gas stove and refrigerator, and have their primary needs such as food and clothing met. Two mothers (M1 and M2) mentioned financial difficulties and reported that they lead very modest lives.

In terms of educational attainment most mothers in the group are above the regional average of 5,8 years of schooling for people aged 15 or more (IBGE, 1996), with the exception of Tais (M6) who completed only four years of schooling.

Four out of the eight mothers in the Neighborhood School reported being involved in other community organizations, and three of them became involved after their experience of participation at the school (the other mother was a volunteer at the church prior to her participation at the school). The two mothers (M2 and M3) with the longest experience of participation in the school are the ones who are currently engaged in formal participation in other local community associations.

A more detailed description of the demographic characteristics of this group of mothers is summarized in Table 5.



Table 5- Personal and Social Characteristics of Mothers Participating in the Neighborhood School

ID	Education	Age	# of kids	Occupation	Work Status	Husband's Occupation	Participation in Other contexts	Family Income	Obs
M1	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	33	2	Homemaker/ Domestic cleaner	Once a week	Works in the Army	No	2ms*	Considered the most active participating mother. Spends most of her free time at the school
M2	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	38	4	Domestic cleaner	Everyday/ part-time	Owens utility repair shop	- Vice- president of community association -teacher of Catholicism	4ms*	Pioneer mother participating at school. Personally encouraged many other mothers to participate.
M3	High-school graduate	40	1	Homemaker/ informal jobs	Varies	Works in car repair shop	-Representative in the Participatory Budget (OP)	6ms*	-President of the Mother's Club
M4	Not finished college	34	2	Homemaker/ former teacher	Not currently working	Works in a factory	-Participates in health classes at the community association	10ms*	-Lives outside the community. Is a member of the group that took over the housing complex
M5	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	37	2	Homemaker/in formal child caretaker	Mornings	Owens a small agri-business	No	12ms*	-
M6	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	44	2	Homemaker	-	Bus driver	No	6ms*	-
M7	High school graduate	28	3	Homemaker	-	Works in the army	-Volunteer at the church	7ms*	-
M8	High school graduate	36	1	Homemaker/in formal caterer	Varies	Taxi driver	No	8ms*	-

• ms= minimum wag monthly salary, approximately U\$75

## Who are the Mothers

In order to introduce the reader to the mothers participating in the Neighborhood School, a brief statement about each one will be provided. A more detailed profile, including excerpts from their interviews, is presented in the Appendix.

**Eliane (M1)** is the most active mother currently at school. She is a member of the Mothers' Club (MC) and the School Council (SC), and spends most of her free time at school. A mother of two (8 and 10), she reported that prior to participating she had very low self-esteem for being over-weight and having low educational attainment and, according to her, for having done nothing remarkable in her life. She feels the school is a friendly environment and seems comfortable in her role as a parent representative in the School Council. In her own words<sup>2</sup>:

For me this school is like a family...I know everybody, we talk...it is good because it is not like before...that the principal and teachers were up there and we could not even think of talking to them...here if I see something wrong I go and talk to them...they are very open, it feels like a family.

**Estela (M2)** was the pioneer mother participating in the Neighborhood School. She started participating as a founder member of the Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM), then joined the Mothers' Club and became a parent representative on the School Council. A mother of 4 (ages 5-18) she became the first woman to be Vice-president at the local Residents Association. All mothers interviewed referred to her as the person who encouraged and set an example of participation at the school. According to Estela, her life has been deeply affected by the experience of participation:

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted in Portuguese. I then translated mothers' words trying to reproduce emic meanings as accurately as possible. Grammatical and syntactic mistakes in the oral expression of mothers could not be preserved in the translation.

Now I see that not wanting to participate is like a disease...it is escaping from reality, refusing to see what is going on, not wanting to see what you should see. But you know to tell you the truth many parents don't like to come to the school, they are afraid they are going to be humiliated, that people will not understand the way they talk, the way they are...their culture. I wish other parents could see how important participation is, for ourselves and for the school.

**Teresa (M3)** is the president of the Mothers' Club and a member of the School Council. She has only a 12 year-old daughter and maintains a very close personal relationship with the principal and the school counselor. She is responsible for elaborating the activity plan for the Mothers' Club and for organizing meetings with all the parents at the school. Teresa is very assertive in her role as parent representative and believes that, through participation, mothers have accomplished a position of high status inside the school. She feels powerful both as an individual and as member of the mothers' group:

We have started the Mothers' Club and the School Council, now even if the principal goes away we are going to continue to exist, because we have power inside the school, a lot of power to do things we want. Nobody will take us out now. (...) you know one feels important to see that you have power, that people invite you to represent the school in city meetings...I feel good about myself, although I do not change my way of being, I am what I am...and they have to accept me.

**Noemi (M4)** lives next to the Quarter School, but one of her children attends the Neighborhood School and she finds the school more friendly and open to parents. A mother of two (9 and 12) she was a teacher in a private pre-school and attended one year of college. She participates in the Mothers' Club and asked the principal to join the School Council so she could get extra points for her resumé, and thus getting a better chance in the selection of teachers to work in municipal schools. Probably due to her level of educational attainment, and past experience as a teacher, she expressed a deep understanding of what happens inside the school, and a critical perspective on the work of teachers. She said:

The other mothers agree with everything they say [principal and vice-principal]...I think it should not be like that, sometimes they are wrong and we have to say it. But they are very open, they listen to us. I try to be polite but to speak up when I see something wrong. Sometimes I don't agree with the way they handle problems, like for example, when students are having learning or behavioral problems. But I tell them my opinion and sometimes they listen to me.

**Tamara (M5)** participates only in the Mothers' Club. A mother of two (7 and 10) without a high school education, she sees participation at the school as a socially accepted (and husband sanctioned) way of socializing with friends and getting emotional support by sharing child-rearing and marriage issues with peers. She was very honest about her major goal in joining the Mothers' Club:

I like to have fun, it is good to learn how to make tapestry and embroidery so we can have something to do in our free time...but the best thing is that we talk, all the gossip and the serious stuff too, you know I am not here to learn anything, I am here because of the girls [other mothers].

**Taís (M6)** also participates only in the Mothers' Club. A mother of two (7 and 14) she is very reserved and said that participation at the MC has helped her establish social contacts with other parents at the school. Despite her low educational attainment (has not finished 5<sup>th</sup> grade) she was one of the first mothers to enroll in the computer classes offered at the school. She describes herself as quiet and passive but reliable. She reports feeling like a newcomer in the Mothers' Club, although she has been participating regularly for 2 years. When asked whether racial prejudice [she is the only black women in the Club, although M1 and M7 also have dark skin] could be contributing to her feeling of alienation from the group she replied:

That maybe...you know that people in the south do have prejudice...but I think it has more to do with the way that I am, I am quiet, difficult to open up...that's why I like this group, they are totally crazy, sometimes they say things that make me embarrassed...they make me laugh. I like them.

**Ana (M7)** is a young (28), ambitious woman who is seeking opportunities for personal and professional development while raising her three young children (2,4 and 6). She joined the Mothers' Club looking for free computer lessons. She later requested to join the School Council. She is a close friend of Noemi (M4) and the two of them have studied together to take the written examination for the teachers' public selection. Ana is actively involved with the Mormon church, where she is a youth coordinator. Her goal is to work part-time as a teacher in order to afford a college education. She admits that her participation in the School Council has not been very active:

I don't say anything, I stay mute...you know the things that they discuss do not interest me, but they are important, so I let them [the other mothers] decide. I know they want the best for the kids, so it is the best for my kids too...so sometimes I miss the meetings, but I am still a member.

**Vanilda (M8)** is the treasurer of Mothers' Club and organizes most of the fund-raising activities at the club. A mother of one boy (10) she says that the social interaction and emotional support she got at the Club was crucial to help her recover from a serious depression. She intends to take part at the School Council in the future but thinks that she has to improve upon the skills she needs for effective participation. She reported that:

They [principal and teachers] wanted me to join the School Council, but I told them I was not ready yet. I like to learn things step by step, to do things right. To be a representative in the School Council means that I would have to talk in front of many people at meetings, I am not ready for that, I don't want to be exposed like that. I only accepted to be the treasurer of the Mothers' Club because I know how to handle money, I keep detailed records, so before joining the School Council I have still to learn from other mothers.

## **How and Why Mothers Got Involved in the Neighborhood School**

Although mothers became involved for different personal reasons some patterns can be found in the way they started to participate formally at the school.

Only one mother, Estela (M2), started to participate following a general invitation from school professionals. Estela reported that she felt embarrassed when at the first meeting at the newly inaugurated school, nobody volunteered to be part of the Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM). Although reportedly shy and with no previous experience of participation, she decided to join the CPM and began to invite other parents to do so. Since then Estela has been consistently involved in formal modalities of parental participation at the school.

All other mothers reported receiving personal invitations to participate in the school. Three mothers (Eliane M1, Tamara M5, and Vanilda M8) were invited personally by the principal during private meetings to discuss other issues related to their children's education. In fact, Vanilda reported that she came to the school to talk about her son and to offer her voluntary services and the principal invited her to join the Mothers' Club. Noemi (M4) was invited by the Vice-principal with whom she maintained a close personal relationship. One mother (Ana, M7) reported joining the Mothers' Club when she learned from a friend that participating mothers could take computer lessons for free. Teresa (M3) was invited by her sister-in-law (Estela, M2) to come to the school and help as soon as she moved to neighborhood.

The question as to why these group of mothers got formally involved in the school has no direct or one-dimensional answer. All mothers referred to their wish to be informed about the schooling process of their children and their awareness of how important it is to be actively involved in school matters. In reality, in response to the question of why they started participating in the school, most mothers presented a quite articulated discourse on the importance of parental participation, which apparently was constructed through their constant interactions with the principal and with professionals from the Municipal

Department of Education. A clear influence from the political discourse on popular participation strongly promoted by the municipal administration could also be captured in the voices of mothers, as illustrated by Noemi's words:

This school follows the principles of a Citizen School. That means that all parents should participate, that we are also responsible for the quality of education in our city. In fact, we should get involved in matters that affect our community. If we fight together we will make things better. Education is everybody's responsibility, we have to make sure that our children receive a good education.

In explaining the reasons for getting involved, mothers moved from more general goals such as fulfilling parental responsibilities and contributing to the quality of public schools to more personal and self-centered goals. Only one mother (Ana, M7) reported that she started participating at the school exclusively for personal interest. She wanted to take computer lessons and learned that mothers at the Club could take them for free. She stated that

I have to say this, I am embarrassed but I have to admit that I joined the Club only to get free computer lessons. We have a computer at home and my son knows more than I do, so I decided to take lessons. (...) But I continue here because the Club has expanded my circle of friends, I met different people, different activities, my world was very small: home, church, home...here they make trips, dinners, it is much better.

Teresa (M3) and Taís (M6) also admitted that the main reason to start participating was to socialize with other mothers in a safe and socially valued environment such as the school. Although sharing the same appreciation for the socialization that participation in the school has provided them, Eliane (M1), Estela (M2) and Teresa (M3) emphasized their goal of ensuring a good education for their children and committing themselves to work in collaboration with teachers and school professionals to achieve this goal.

The data indicates that the most effective way to get mothers involved in formal modalities of participation seems to be through personal invitations from principals,

teachers and school professionals. This suggests, along with other evidence to be later presented, that mothers still tend to perceive the school as a territory 'owned' by professionals, and they should wait until they are invited to join in.

## **What Mothers Do at the Neighborhood School**

Although a general description of the functions performed at the Mothers' Club and the School Council has already been provided, a closer look on what individual mothers do during the time they spend at the school helps to illuminate the concrete aspects of the experience of participation for each of them. The multidimensional nature of the experience of participation requires a careful description in the activities and contexts that individuals engage when participating in schools (Salisbury, 1986; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).

**Eliane** (M1) spends most of her afternoons at the school. Upon my arrival to conduct field work, she volunteered to be my chaperone and to contact other mothers to be interviewed. While her children attend extra-curricular activities Eliane performs all kinds of tasks requested by teachers and/or school professionals, such as labeling and distributing books in classrooms, writing school announcements, and escorting children home when they are sick. Together with the school pedagogic supervisor she writes and edits the school's newsletter. Eliane described a very interesting process of change in her perception of what participation in school would entail:

In the beginning I did not understand school's stuff. I mean, I came here, did everything they [principal and school professionals] asked me to do, simple things like distributing books. I thought I could not participate in discussions about the work of teachers and stuff. But after going to so many meetings at the Department of Education I realized that this is supposed to be a Citizen School, that means that citizens can participate in everything. Of course I know that the work of teachers is not easy, actually now I know much better all the problems teachers face. But



whether they like or not, I have the right to ensure that my children receive a good education, so nowadays I get involved in everything that goes on inside this school.

**Estela (M2)** comes to school when she is called upon to attend School Council meetings, during which she works as a note taker (secretary). She reported that during the last year she has not been able to attend the Mothers' Club regularly as she used to do. In the past Estela used to come to school everyday , sometimes twice a day, to see what was going on. She reported that other mothers and even the principal always consulted with her before important decisions concerning parents' participation in the school. Estela also serves as mediator between community members and school professionals, scheduling appointments and explaining school procedures to new parents. She described that:

When I am at the school many mothers that see me there ask for help. Sometimes they even come to my house to ask me to walk with them to the school. They ask me to solve all their problems with the school, one wanted to get a place for her son in the pre-school, another wanted to talk to the school counselor and I scheduled a meeting for her. They come to me because they know me, from all the meetings that I have participated in. They think that I have power in the school, that I have free access to everybody there. You know, sometimes the school is not an easy environment for some mothers. I still remember what it is like for me. One feels afraid to be humiliated. So I think that mothers come to me because I will make this first contact, between them and the professionals at the school.

**Teresa (M3)** is the president of the Mothers' Club and often represents the Club in school and in the Department of Education's meetings. She has a very close relationship with the principal and other school professionals and has been hired to perform independent (and paid) jobs at the school such as ordering new cafeteria curtains and some of the Christmas decorations. Teresa comes to the school several times during the week. She sells home made products to teachers and other mothers at the school, and advertises her products and services in the school newsletter. She believes that she does a very important work at the school and therefore is entitled to some privileges:

We started the Club, so we had to learn everything , we did the most difficult part: learn how to organize things, how to get money for what we wanted to do. You probably know this, but we do all the fund-raising for the school. So if the principal needs extra money, for things that were not planned in the initial budget she comes to us. But we only agree if we want it, otherwise we don't do it. So sometimes I ask to have a free lunch here at school. Parents are not allowed, you know. But I say, I work so much for this school, why can't a have a simple meal here? So sometimes the women at the cafeteria gives it to me, but only sometimes.

**Noemi (M4)** does not live in the community and comes to school only to attend the School Council and the weekly Mothers' Club meetings. She complained that because she is not always around the other mothers forget to invite her to some activities, such buying presents and writing birthday cards for teachers and school personnel. Noemi gets involved in discussions about academic and disciplinary issues at the school. Because of her background as a teacher she feels comfortable in discussing pedagogical issues with teachers. She enjoys when she is invited to go to meetings at the Department of Education, which she finds interesting and exciting.

**Tamara (M5)** is mostly involved in the social activities of the Mothers' Club. She is responsible for organizing the annual dinner in a local restaurant, the field trips to nearby tourist places, and the birthday parties at the Club. Tamara is also a volunteer for small chores at the school, such as stamping the new arrived materials and organizing fund raising activities for students and families in need. She does not get involved in any educational matters.

**Taís (M6)** comes to the Club meetings without a clear notion of what she is expected to do. She comes to meet with other mothers and see what needs to be done. She enjoyed taking the hand craft workshops which were offered and participated in all the social activities promoted by other mothers. Taís took computer lessons for several weeks but had to stop to take care of her father who was hospitalized.

**Ana (M7)** does not attend Club meetings regularly, since according to her she does not have child-care (she sometimes brings her younger children to the Mothers' Club meetings). She says that she is willing to help in any way but has not taken part in any major activity carried out at the Club. During the past year Ana dedicated herself to the preparation of the public selection of teachers and many times came to the Club only to meet with Noemi and to talk to the principal and other school professionals about the requirements to pass the examination. She reported that she finds School Council's meetings boring and uninteresting for mothers, although the issues discussed were important for school functioning and the quality of education provided. About the School Council she stated that:

It is very boring, they don't talk about very interesting things. OK, I know that is important stuff and it is good to know what teachers are doing, but I am not really into it. Do you understand? I shouldn't say that is boring but that is what I really think. At the Council one cannot make the jokes and have the fun as we have at the Mothers' Club. But I want to be a teacher so I need to learn what really goes on inside schools.

**Vanilda (M8)** is responsible for all the financial issues at the Club and keeps the records of all activities developed. She possess a technical/secondary level degree in accounting and has worked in her parents' restaurant doing a similar task. Vanilda comes to the school several days a week, and together with Eliane (M1), buys all the necessary materials for the training workshops and the festivities at the Club. She also advertises her catering services at the school's newsletter and has plans to become a member of the School Council next term.

The diversity of what individual mothers actually do while involved in a formal modality of parental participation at the school helps to explain the important differences in the meaning and consequences of experience on participation for each of them.

For mothers such as Eliane, Estela and Teresa (M1, M2 and M3) participation has constituted an opportunity to acquire personal and social skills, and a means to become involved in wider and more formal forms of participation at community level. Teresa's (M3) experience illustrates well this aspect of the experience of participation:

We have started everything in this school. For example, I had no idea how to be a president of a Mothers' Club. I had to learn everything. Nowadays I know so much that they [neighbors] invited me to be a member of the local Committee of the Participatory Budget (OP). Participating there is much more difficult than in the school. The guys are tough. Everybody wants something, they are not there just to help. It was good that I learned how to negotiate with the principal and the other mothers at the school, I was not so naive. Now I know exactly how to get what I want. But participating in the OP was not a good experience. Can you believe that they did not pave my street, after all the mobilization we did to have the streets of our community paved? Those guys over there are very political, I think we have to learn how to get involved in local politics. That's something I don't like very much, but once you get involved you have to learn.

For other mothers, such Tamara (M5) and Taís (M6) participation has constituted one form of socialization which required little investment in acquiring new knowledge and skills. This form of socialization fitted well with the socially determined women's role of caretakers and educational agents, and therefore was easily assimilated by them and by other family members (such as authoritarian husbands). Tamara (M5) provided the most enthusiastic account of the socializing features of the Mothers' Club:

Our meetings are a lot of fun. The other mothers don't know what they are missing here. We come and talk, tell jokes, learn about all the gossip in the neighborhood. Our parties and trips are great. When we travel we are like a bunch of adolescents, we do crazy things. Just to know that once a week I will come and spend the afternoon at the Club makes me feel good. It is not that we don't do important things for the school... we do. But nobody can imagine how much fun we have here.

Ana (M7) is a clear example of an instrumental use of participation in the school for personal purposes. She participates in order to obtain the benefits, such as free computer classes, to which mothers at the Club are entitled. However, she reported being committed

to fulfilling the caretaker's role and believes that her level of participation will increase once all her children attend the school.

For Vanilda (M8) participation has constituted both an opportunity to apply her knowledge and skills on the behalf of the school and as an intermediary step towards re-entering the formal labor market. She plans to open a bakery shop in the community in partnership with her sister, based on the experience and client network she has built through her participation as caterer in school festivities.

### **Effects of Participation Reported by Individual Mothers**

Mothers in the Neighborhood School reported a wide and multi-dimensional range of effects they perceive to be associated with their experience of participation. As already mentioned, not all mothers had previously reflected on the specific effects that participating in schools has had in their lives, and therefore the interviews served as a 'conscientization process' as Paulo Freire described the process of reflecting critically about one's own lived experience (Freire, 1992).

The responses to questions related to effects of the experience of participation tended to follow a continuum from the most socially desirable/politically advocated to more personal/self-centered effects. It is important to note that for some mothers admitting that they got personal benefits from participating at school was felt as embarrassing or not appropriate. This seemed to indicate the hegemony of the view, strongly disseminated by the municipal administration, that participation should be for "the common good" and not for individualistic purposes.

In general, the initial dimension of effects reported by mothers was related to the contribution that participation has enabled them to improve the quality of public schools and to ensure a good education for their children. Within this category there are effects such as a better understanding of how schools works setting a good example for children by valuing education, and being able to represent parents' views on school issues.

The second dimension of effects referred to the socialization process that was engendered through participation. To all mothers, breaking the isolation of the domestic life was the most clear and straightforward personal effect of their involvement in formal participation at the school.

The third dimension of effects are related to more context specific and individual effects, which were mainly dependent on the previous experience and type of involvement that each mother had at the school.

A brief description of the major effects reported by the mothers will reveal the comprehensiveness of the meanings and dimensions they acquire in the context of the lives of each mother.

**Eliane's (M1)** first reported effect of participation was a sense of empowerment, of learning the rights and responsibilities of parents and teachers in children's education. She also reported that because she was around the school so much she learned to appreciate the complexity of the work of teachers and school professionals as well as how to collaborate with them. Eliane declared that she has acquired important knowledge and skills, particularly the acquisition of a more sophisticated vocabulary, computer skills, and writing and editing. However, for Eliane the most significant effects of participation were the ones which impacted her self-image:

I was very shy, you would not recognize me. I was always in a corner. Now my husband says that I am like a sergeant, always speaking up and fighting for what I think is right. (...) the first meeting of the School Council I was silent because they used a lot of words I didn't know. Now I understand what they mean and I have learned to speak like them...of course sometimes I still misspell words, but it's OK, I am still learning. I was afraid that I would not be able to participate in the School Council because I don't have a lot of education, but the principal said it was all right.

According to her, a shy and insecure person, she has become more confident and has developed a higher self-esteem through the recognition of her contribution to the school by other mothers, by the principal, and by other school personnel. Eliane attributes the establishment of new relationships with persons outside her "everyday world" and the exposure to new and previously far reaching social contexts to her experience of participation. To further illustrate the effects of participation in her life, Eliane told me about an episode that made her extremely proud and happy:

The other day I was with my kids at a public event in the city and we met the Mayor. He looked at me and recognized me. I met him at several meetings at the Department of Education, but I would never have expected him to recognize me! My kids were so proud of me. I told them, see your mother is an important person! I was happy because my kids saw that I was really doing something for the school, that I am really into fighting to provide a good education for them.

**Estela (M2)** is the mother who most clearly and promptly described the effects of participation in her life. Being the mother with the longest participation in the Neighborhood School, Estela has been gradually moving from less formal to more structured and political forms of participation. She described how important it was for her to interact with people with higher educational attainment in a friendly environment such as the school and how much she learned from those interactions. Estela reported learning communication skills (wider vocabulary, how to build an argument, how to defend her opinion in a meeting) and writing skills, such as writing a concise meeting report. She also

mentioned an important effect on her self-image, with increased confidence and self-esteem built upon a sense of recognition and appreciation by the community. Through successive learning experiences with other parents and teachers Estela reported acquiring skills which have been crucial in expanding the realm of possibilities for her personal and professional development. As concrete examples, she cited key contacts at the Department of Education which allowed her to successfully apply for a college scholarship for her eldest daughter, the help (both financial and in-kind) she received when her son was hospitalized, and the improved relationship with her former employer in a house-cleaning job. Estela attributes all the recent changes in her life to the skills and attitudes she learned through participation in the school.

It all started that day, that I felt bad for the principal because parents would not raise their hands and volunteer to participate in the school, and then I don't know how I got the courage, I raised my hand and became a member of the CPM. And then I was invited to be a secretary in the School Council. They needed someone to take notes during the meetings, the principal asked me to do it. I didn't know how to do it at first, but I learned step by step. It is not simple, you know? (...) but people at Residents Association heard that I was good at taking notes, they invited me to be a secretary there and there I went. After a short period I became Vice-president there. And now I have the chance of being the coordinator of this new literacy program. For someone like me, this is unbelievable! And all started when I raised my hand and said that I would help at the school!

**Teresa (M3)** had initial difficulties in identifying the effects of her experience of participation beyond being able to contribute to the quality of education provided to her daughter. She then described the specific content she learned at the training workshops and the expansion of her social networks with the inclusion of other mothers, teachers and school professionals. In the course of the interview process Teresa gradually realized that she is probably the mother who maintains the closest relationships with the principal and other school personnel, and that she has used these connections for individual purposes. For example, Teresa mentioned that:



You know a lot of people think that we get money from our work in the school, that as a president of the Mothers' Club I get a salary. I can tell you, one of the few things that we don't get through participation is money. You know I spend a lot of time in the school. Sometimes the principal hires me, as a person, to do some jobs at the school. For example I sewed the cafeteria curtains, I did the Christmas decoration. I asked her to hire me because I needed the money. She gives me preference. I also sell things to other mothers. I bring to the Club and ask if anyone is interested in buying. It's good because I can make some extra money. (...) another good thing about participating so actively is that you get close to the principal and the school counselor, I can talk to them about my personal problems. Instead of telling a neighbor, for example, who would be gossiping around I talk to them and they can give me professional advice for free.

Noemi (M4) reported effects of her formal participation at the Neighborhood School that clearly reflect her previous experience as a teacher. She said the most important effect of her participation has been learning what really goes on inside the school in order to help her children succeed in the school environment. She also mentioned that the close relationship she maintains with the Vice-principal has been a source of important personal and professional advice. It was through this relationship that she got the permission to join the School Council, despite the fact that she was not an elected parent representative. She reported that:

The Vice-principal has helped me so much. To be honest nowadays I consider her a close friend. She used to be my daughter's first grade teacher and since then we have been close. She is actually a role model for the kids and for all of us. She is so beautiful and so intelligent! She is always there for me. She gave me a lot of support during the preparation for the written examination. She thinks that I would be a good teacher. (...) Since I started participating I made some good friends. People with whom I have a lot of things in common. I broke the capsule in which I was living and started looking for other things to do in the community... I have joined the Walker's Association and started taking dance classes at the community center with a friend I met at the Club.

**Tamara (M5)** reported effects that were related to the social contacts provided through participation in the Mothers' Club. Tamara said that the Club has created an opportunity for her to get out of the house and to enjoy herself in the company of other

mothers. Because the Club is a school based activity considered closely related to her role as a mother, she has gained permission and encouragement from her husband to participate. Attendance at the Club has allowed Tamara to engage in otherwise forbidden activities, such as trips, meetings and parties. She reported that participation in the Mothers' Club has had a positive impact on her self-esteem for two reasons: she feels more stimulated to improve her physical appearance and is taking better care of herself; she also has closer and more personal contact with the principal and other school professionals.

You know, I feel really good about myself when the principal greets me by my first name in front of everybody. The other parents see that I am close to her, that I work with her. When I organize things, such as parties and bazaars, I feel happy when everything goes well. I feel that I am doing something useful and helping other people, that I am a contributing member of the school. I know that I also get help here. When I am depressed all I need to do is come to the Club and talk. They understand me, they have similar problems. So in a way I help but I am being helped too.

Taís (M6) mentioned that the major effect derived from her participation has been a sense of belonging which she did not have in the community. Being part of the Club has provided her with a group identity, which has been crucial in helping her interact with other mothers at the school. Taís also feels that through participation she has learned what goes on inside the school and is more capable of better supporting her children's schooling process. She reported that:

Coming here and learning things has helped me to understand better how schools really are. You know, I did not have a lot of education. I cannot for example help my older son with his homework, it is too advanced for me. But now I know that I should check if they did their homework, ask them when they have tests. The other mothers in the Club have been really friends, they explain things to me when I don't know. In the Club I can ask all the questions, I feel free and have the courage to ask anything.

Ana (M7) regarded the access to the information needed for her prospective career as a teacher and for establishing new and productive friendships with mothers, the principal

and other school professionals as the most important effect of her experience of participation. She reported that participation in the school has been an effective way to expand her social network beyond the church community and to meet other women with the same professional interests. As a consequence of her participation, Ana specifically cited meeting Noemi (M4), with whom she has established a close friendship and who has been a companion in the preparation for the public selection of teachers. In order to illustrate another direct consequence of her participation, namely establishing closer relations with the principal, Ana cited the following episode:

It is much easier to come to them when you participate, they listen to you more promptly. Let me give you an example: one day my son got home without his sweater, which I was still paying for! So I came to the school immediately and went straight to the principal's office. She and the school supervisor helped me find the sweater right away, they knew me...they knew who I was...that's why it is so important to participate here in the school. You are not just a mother, a face without a name. You are someone, someone that also works for this school.

**Vanilda (M8)** reported that the most important effect of participation has been the emotional support she has received from other mothers, the principal and from the school counselor after a tragedy in her family. She considers the amount and quality of the attention that she and her son received was a direct consequence of the contribution she is giving to the school through her participation. She also mentioned that by participating in the school she has been able to learn computer skills, which has allowed her to share with her son her interest in computer games and learning activities. Another important effect of participation cited by Vanilda was the expansion of the client network for her catering services through the advertisement provided by sampling her food during school festivities and in the school newsletter. In her own words:

You should have seen how much they helped me. They came to my house, referred my son to a psychologist. They made me see that I had to get over it, that I needed to get out of the house. I am sure that they did that because I was participating in the

school, they knew me. So I think that the attention that I got was a consequence of the work I did for the school. Now I am ready to go on with my life, I have a lot of plans. I see that people like me and that they like the food that I cook, so I am thinking of opening a bakery in the community.

Table 6 summarizes the main features of the experience of participation for mothers in the Neighborhood School.

Table 6- Forms of Participation and Major Effects Reported by Mothers in the Neighborhood School

Name	Type of participation	Duration	Reason to start	Kind of contribution	Benefits/Effects*
M1	Member of the Mothers' Club (MC) and the School Council (SC)	3 years	Invited by the principal and wanted to do something to ensure a good education to her kids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Helps school staff with office work</li><li>-Types and edits the parents' newsletter</li><li>-Responsible for opening and closing the Club's room</li><li>-Available to do any request from the school staff</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Learning communication skills ( new vocabulary)</li><li>-Awareness of rights and responsibilities as parent</li><li>-Improved self-esteem</li><li>-Acquisition of skills (computer, editing)</li><li>-Closer relationships with professionals as role models</li><li>-Exposure to new social environments and actors</li></ul>
M2	Member of the first group of CPM in the school. Currently is a member of the MC and the SC	10 years	Felt that parents needed to be represented in the CPM and there were no other volunteers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Secretary of the School Council</li><li>-Invited and encouraged mothers to join the MC</li><li>-Parent representative of the school in official meetings</li><li>-Recruits and orients new mothers in different forms of participation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Learning to participate in a friendly environment</li><li>-Increased self-confidence</li><li>-Acquisition of skills (writing reports, proposals)</li><li>-Access to resources through contacts at the SMED (scholarship for daughter)</li><li>-Professional opportunities derived from skills and contacts acquired</li><li>-Emotional support from peers</li></ul>
M3	President of the MC and member of the SC	8 years	Invited by sister-in-law (M2) and desire to accompany the education of her only daughter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Presides MC meetings</li><li>-Instructor on handicraft courses</li><li>-Organizes fundraising activities</li><li>-Parent representative in official meetings</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Acquisition of knowledge about school education</li><li>-Increased self-confidence, self-esteem and empowerment</li><li>-Expansion of income generation set of skills and network</li><li>-Access to the knowledge and help from people with higher educational attainment</li><li>-Emotional support from sharing problems with new friends</li><li>-Alternative sources of income generated at the school (offers paid services to the school as a sewer and cleaner)</li></ul>
M4	Member of the MC and the SC	2 years		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Organizes social functions at the Club and at the school</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Participation as a strategy to pursue professional career inside municipal schools</li><li>-Relationships with school professionals provided emotional support and guidance on child-rearing problems</li><li>-Socialization/ making new friends</li><li>-Seeking other forms of participation due to the positive experience of participation in the school</li></ul>

Name	Type of participation	Duration	Reason to start	Kind of contribution	Benefits/Effects
M5	Member of the MC	3 years	Invited by the principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Organizes social functions at the club</li> <li>-Helps in fundraising activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Breaking social isolation (making new friends)</li> <li>-Increased self-esteem</li> <li>-Emotional support</li> <li>-Participating in activities(trips, outings...) sanctioned by husband because are related to the school and traditional women's role</li> <li>-Making friends</li> <li>-Better understanding of school functioning and how to help her children</li> <li>-Opportunity to learn new skills (particularly computers)</li> <li>-Emotional support from expanded social network</li> </ul>
M6	Member of MC	2 years	Invited by another mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Helps to organize club's activities</li> <li>-Regular attendance and willingness to help in small chores</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Expanding the social network and life experiences</li> <li>-Closer relationships and better understanding of what is being done by teachers inside classrooms</li> <li>-Empowerment (gained the right to criticize)</li> <li>-Participation as a strategy of push forward her professional career as a teacher</li> </ul>
M7	Member of the MC and the SC	2 years	Joined the Club to be able to take computer lessons for free. Requested to join the SC to get credentials needed to work as teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Helps to organize club's social activities</li> <li>-Brings her experience as church volunteer to the Club</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Higher self-esteem and motivation to overcome problems</li> <li>-Income generating opportunity through expanded social network (cat food for private and school parties)</li> </ul>
M8	Treasurer of the MC	3 years	Invited by the principal, she has already a close relationship with school counselor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Responsible for the Club's finances</li> <li>-Brings gifts and food to raise funds for the Club</li> <li>-Helps school staff with distribution of materials and other chores</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Emotional support from friends and school professionals</li> <li>-Acquisition of knowledge/skills</li> <li>-Expanding social network</li> <li>-Higher self-esteem and motivation to overcome problems</li> <li>-Income generating opportunity through expanded social network (cat food for private and school parties)</li> </ul>

\*The list of effects presented here is the result of preliminary analysis of mothers' reports on their experience of participation.

### **VI.3-Mothers Who Participate in the Quarter School**

The group of mothers interviewed in the Quarter School has a specific feature which differentiates it from the group of mothers in the Neighborhood School. While mothers in the Neighborhood School are all currently participating in at least one formal modality of parental participation (Mothers' Club or the School Council), in the Quarter school only two mothers are currently participating in the School Council. Five out of the seven mothers interviewed were active participants in the Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM) which was closed in 1997.

As will be later demonstrated, this specific feature did not result in significant differences in the effects of participation reported by mothers in both groups. Mothers in the Quarter School were actively participating until one year prior to the first interview of the study and had clear and vivid memories of the experience of participation. The eventual bias which could be introduced by the different timing was minimized by focusing on three key issues: the context of participation to which mothers were exposed, their activities and experiences within this context, and their perception of effects generated by participation. The focus on the context of participation, both as a collective and individually constructed experience, has generated a stable ground upon which the reports of each mother could be analyzed.

#### **Who are the Mothers Participating in the Quarter School**

The demographic information on the group of participating mothers in the Quarter School show similar characteristics of the group of mothers from the Neighborhood School. All mothers are married and currently living with their husbands. Their level of educational

attainment ranges from 4<sup>th</sup> grade to high school graduation, and their ages range from 34 to 46 years old. Mothers have from 2 to 5 children and at least one of their children is currently enrolled at the Quarter School.

The reported family income is between 4-7 minimum salaries, with the exception of one mother (Mara, M11) whose reported husband's income is unexpectedly high for residents at the housing complex (15 ms). Five mothers belong to the group of residents that originally took over the apartments, and two (Sônia, M9 and Vilma, M10) live in simple, but privately owned houses near the complex.

Only one of the mothers (Maria do Carmo, M13) is not currently involved in an informal income generating activity, and one is looking for a job (Vilma, M10). All other mothers reported performing activities such as sewing (Sônia, M9 and Gilda, M12), selling home products (Lena, M14) and video taping private celebrations (Zenir, M11) in order to make extra income for their families.

Although the mothers who live inside the complex have identical small apartments (two-bedroom, bathroom, kitchen/living room) the furnishings of the apartments are actually very different. Lena's (M14) apartment is very simple, with only basic appliances while Mara's (M11) apartment, which has an iron gate in the front door, has sophisticated appliances such a big-screen TV, air-conditioning, and relatively expensive furniture. The two mothers, however, took over the apartments during the squatter's action and currently pay the same mortgage to legally own them.

In terms of participation in other contexts, mothers of the group are, or have been, managers of the buildings in which they live (Maria do Carmo, M13 and Zenir, M15) or have been involved in the local Residents Association (Vilma, M10, Gilda, M12 and Lena M14). The work as building manager reportedly involves high level negotiation skills since



not all residents are willing to pay the monthly maintenance fees or easily comply to the norms of the building, such as not having loud music after a certain time, or not consuming and/or selling drugs on the common grounds.

The three mothers, Vilma (M10), Gilda (M12), Lena (M14), who have participated in the local Residents' Association described it as a very political environment, dominated primarily by men who wish to become politicians. The Association is often involved in legal battles with the government or demanding more and better quality public services. Mothers' involvement in the Association was specific and limited to the educational activities promoted there. Only Lena was involved with the election process in the Association.

Social and personal characteristics of mothers participating in the Quarter School are summarized in the Table 7.

Table 7- Personal and Social Characteristics of Mothers Participating in the Quarter School

ID	Education	Age	# of kids	Occupation	Work Status	Husband's Occupation	Participation in Other contexts	Family Income	Obs
M9	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	46	5	Homemaker/seamstress	Works at home	Works in a factory	No	7ms*	Considered the most active participating mother. Is the only mother from the CPM who continues in the SC
M10	High school graduate	34	2	Homemaker	Looking for a job	Not reported	-Participated in Residents Association	7ms*	Participates in the SC. Says that it took almost 2 years to learn how to participate in the SC
M11	Has not finished high-school	40	2	Homemaker/informal video maker	Usually weekends	Works in bank	No	15ms*	President of the CPM for 4 years
M12	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	40	2	Homemaker/informal seamstress	Not currently working	Retired/worked in a factory	-Participated in the courses at the Residents' Association	7ms*	-Very active at the CPM, the longest participation of the group (9 years)
M13	4 <sup>th</sup> grade	38	4	Homemaker	-	Owens a small utility repair business	-Building manager	5ms*	-Currently organizing a cultural/dance group at the school supported by parents
M14	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	41	2	Homemaker/informal sales	Works at home	Bus driver	-Helped to organize elections at the residents' association	5ms*	-Provided the most detailed report of the CPM activities/trips.
M15	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	37	3	homemaker/informal helper at snack bar	works 3 hours a day	-construction worker at the municipality	-is vice-manager of the building	4ms*	-Continues to visit the school often

ms= minimum wage monthly salary, approximately U\$ 75

## **Who are the Mothers Participating in the Quarter School**

**Sônia (M9)** is the oldest mother in the sample (46) and the only mother in the Quarter School who has been participating uninterruptedly for the last 5 years. She was a member of the former Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM) and now is a parent representative at the School Council. Sônia is a mother of five children (10-19), and is helping to raise the baby of her single daughter who still lives with the family. She is very out-going and has a motherly/caretaker attitude towards students, staff and even some teachers at the school. She provided the following description of herself:

I am actually a big mother to everybody in the school, that's what I am. Always taking care of everybody. The students know that they can come to me if they have problems, I am here to help. Because I have been here in the school for so long, mothers stop me in the streets to talk about problems their kids are having, about things that they want to say to the teachers. I do small things that please everyone, like for example baking a birthday cake for a teacher or a staff member of the school.

**Vilma (M10)** is also a parent representative in the School Council and has been participating in the school for the last two years. She is reserved and quiet and reported that only recently has she learned how to behave and what to say during Council's meetings. Before joining the Council Vilma participated in the social mobilization for a new community health center and used to come to the school anytime she thought one of her daughters was mistreated. Now that her two daughters (11, 12) are more independent, Vilma intends to go back to the formal labor market and is currently looking for a job, preferably in a company or factory. She reported that:

To be honest I didn't want to be a member of the School Council, I thought that's trouble, and I don't want to get into trouble with other mothers and the teachers. I know that we create a lot of enemies just by the fact that we are in the School Council. I am the kind of person who prefers to avoid problems. But Sônia convinced me to come, and now I like it. I think that I have changed a lot.

**Mara (M11)** was the president of the Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM) for four years. She reported the highest family income in the sample and leads a life style which diverges significantly from other women in the housing complex. She usually spends her afternoons at a private club taking swimming lessons and gym classes. Mara tries to limit interactions with the neighbors, and has instructed her daughters (12, 16) to do the same, explaining that they belong to a different social class. Her older daughter is currently studying at a private school in order to better prepare herself to take the university entrance exam, but the younger one continues to attend the Quarter School. According to her:

I had a great time participating in the school, we had so much fun! Of course there were problems too and I got fed up with them. You know the mothers here want me to go back and participate more in the school, but I tell them that my life is different now, that I have other interests. I tell my daughters that they should have other things in mind too, that they have a different future than most of their friends in this community. People here are nice, but as you can see we are different from them.

**Gilda (M12)** was cited by several mothers as the most active mother ever to participate in the Quarter School. An out-going and obviously generous person (during the interview many neighbors stopped by and asked for food or a piece of advice), Gilda reported that the nine years she has actively participated in the school were among the best in her life. A mother of two (15,19), with a 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, Gilda reported that she finds great pleasure in being around people and having a sense of helping the community. She has a sister with a college education but reported that she believes she has more 'practical knowledge' to deal with people and to handle problems in interpersonal relationships. In her words:

That's what I am, always ready to help other people. I tell my sister you may have the theory but I understand people much better. I really love to help other people, to be part of something. When we moved here every afternoon we would gather in front of the building to discuss our problems and what we were going to do. That's gone now...it's a shame, people are only interested in themselves. Participating in

the school made me feel good, I would walk down the streets and people would say- there goes Gilda, the mother from the school. I might start participating again, it was so good!

**Maria do Carmo** (M13) participated for four years at the CPM and is currently trying to initiate a cultural/dance club run by mothers at the Quarter School. A mother of four (7,7,10,15) her two youngest daughters participate in the school's dance group and Maria do Carmo is actively involved the preparation of costumes and other necessary arrangements for school performances. Maria do Carmo has been under psychiatric treatment for depression for the last two years and is looking for ways to get involved in the school again. She reported that:

I need to get more involved again. Because I like to help, to do useful things. Even staying at home I am always looking for ways to help other people. My husband tells me that I am a fool, that I should only worry about myself and our kids. But that's not the way I am. I have to do something. Last year I tried to go back to school to finish elementary school, but he didn't allow me to go out in the evenings. He doesn't understand that I need to do something.

**Lena** (M14) participated in the CPM for 8 years and is the mother who provided the most vivid and detailed account of all the activities developed at the school. A mother of two children (13,19) Lena is helping to raise the baby of her single daughter who still lives with the family. She has also participated in the local Residents' Association but stopped because the environment there was not very friendly. Lena was an elected parent representative in the School Council but resigned because she felt manipulated and not respected by the teachers and school professionals. Lena reported that she misses the exposure to the people with high educational attainment that participation in the school used to provide to her. She said that:

Being part of that group was wonderful. I think it was the time of my life during which I met the most interesting people. We used to go downtown to attend meetings at the Department of Education. It was great! I got all excited, put my best

clothes on and even some make-up! I tried to get involved again, they invited me to help in the election at the Residents Association, but it was not the same. At the school we, the mothers, organized everything, we were free to do whatever we wanted. I have always liked to be involved in community things. When we invaded the housing complex, I did a lot of community work. We got a lot of things together.

**Zenir** (M15) participated in the CPM for six years and often visits the Quarter School, where her twin daughters still attend. Her oldest son (17) dropped out of school and had a baby with his girlfriend, although he continues to live at home. Zenir reported that she stopped participating because she thought there was nothing more for her to do at the school. If the mothers' cultural club is indeed created in the school she is willing to participate, but she said she will wait to be invited because she does not want to seem intrusive.

I participated there because other mothers invited me. I would never go to the school and say I want to participate. I think one should wait till they are invited. But I was sad when they finished the CPM, how could they do that? We did so many good things for that school. I am not the kind of person who likes to impose myself, or to give orders to other people. I am more the kind who waits and sees what is going to happen.

## **How and Why Mothers Got Involved in the Quarter School**

The predominant way in which mothers started participating in the Quarter School was through an invitation by another mother who was already participating. With the exception of Mara (M11), who reported receiving a special invitation from the principal at the time, and Gilda (M12) who became involved after a general invitation from school professionals, all mothers said they joined a formal modality of participation because they were stimulated by other mothers to do so.

This form of invitation is consistent with the perception that there is a distance between mothers and school personnel in the Quarter School, and that there is little

encouragement for more intensive interaction between parents and teachers. Mothers reported that they started participating in the school through different ways.

**Sônia** (M9) got involved in the CPM through a friend who was already participating. She reported that she decided to participate more actively in the school after an incident in which her son was threatened by older students in a fight during recess. She felt the need to spend more time inside the school in order to supervise the behavior of students and to guarantee the safety of her children. During her time in the school Sônia gradually got involved in the fund-raising activities at the CPM and continues to be a parent representative in the School Council to this date.

**Vilma** (M10) was invited by Sônia to enter the elections to become a parent representative at the School Council. She was proud to be elected but had no idea what was expected from her, and feared that she would have to get formally involved in the conflicts between parents and teachers and school professionals. Vilma's major motivation to overcome her initial fears was the goal to contribute to the improvement of the school attended by her daughters.

**Mara** (M11) said she was invited to participate in the school by the principal, who 'perceived' she was a mother with great skills and that she could make an important contribution to the school. She started participating as a favor to the principal but justified her long permanence at the school by saying that she really enjoyed all the activities developed at the CPM. According to her:

You know the principal of that time, it was a man, he could see that I was a different mother just by talking to me. So he convinced me to join the CPM, actually to be the president. First I was not sure whether I wanted to do it, but I finally accepted. And I invited many other mothers to join. If you look you will see that many mothers that participated in the CPM were invited by me.

**Gilda** (M12) reported that she started participating right after she moved to the housing complex and attended a meeting at the school. Amidst the general social mobilization the community was undergoing at that time, Gilda reported that she thought she should accept the invitation from the principal to participate in the institution where her children spend most of their time. According to her:

The principal and people from the school were trying to get parents to participate and create a CPM. I thought I should do it, my kids are going to this school and if I want to make sure that they get a good education I have to do something about it. That's how I became involved. And afterwards I invited other mothers to join in, I invited all my friends who had kids at the school, but only a few joined.

**Maria do Carmo** (M13) was invited by another mother to join the CPM. She was enthusiastic about the work mothers were doing at the school and enjoyed the opportunity to join them. According to her:

I always wanted to participate but had no idea how to get involved. So one day a friend of mine invited me to go to a meeting at the CPM, I said why not? From that day on I participated in everything that mothers did inside the school. I know that the principal sometimes says in the general meetings that parents should participate, but I don't think she really means it, parents know that she is just paying lip service to what the Department of Education wants her to do. That's why just a few mothers participate.

**Lena** (M14) was also invited by other mothers to join the CPM and continued to participate until it was dismantled. She was elected to be a parent representative for the first School Council, but resigned one year later because she thought that the Council was useless and manipulated by school professionals.

What? They want us to participate and then they want to tell us what to do? I joined the CPM because a friend of mine who was the president showed me that they were doing great things, that they had freedom to do what they thought was right for the school. But then the principal told me to join the School Council and at first I accepted. But when I realized that we were just puppets, that all the decisions were already taken before the meetings I said what? I didn't want to be a clown, a puppet in the hands of those professionals.



**Zenir** (M15) was invited to participate in the CPM by Mara and Gilda who were her neighbors. She reported that she used to observe the work of the mothers at the CPM and liked it, so she was happy at the opportunity to join them. Zenir reported being a loyal and reliable participant and still does not understand why the CPM was disbanded.

Among the reports on the reasons for how each mother started participating in the Quarter School, two problematic issues could be identified: first, there was the perception of serious conflicts inside the school, which mobilized mothers to protect their children (M9) or made them reluctant or fearful of participating (M10). This indicated that mothers tended to regard the school as an unsafe place for their children and a treacherous site for themselves.

Second, there were the drastic differences mothers perceived between the former modality of participation (CPM) and the present modality (School Council), particularly in terms of parental power and influence inside the school. The refusal to participate in the School Council by former very actively participating mothers seems to indicate that this modality of participation has been constructed as a territory of teachers and school personnel in which the participation of mothers could be easily manipulated or disregarded. More seriously, there have been no reported efforts from the principal and school professionals to change this perception and to depict the School Council as the most powerful and democratic instance of participation parents can have in municipal public schools.

## What Mothers Do at the Quarter School

There is great diversity in what mothers really do, or did, during the time they spent at the Quarter School. Since a group of mothers is no longer participating in the school, the description of the activities was based on recollections of what they did while participating in the CPM. To increase the reliability of these accounts, and recreate the context as accurately as possible, all mothers were asked to describe the activities of each member of the group. Individual accounts were then compared to what other mothers had said, and only activities which were described by at least one other mother were included in each mother's individual account.

The two mothers currently participating at the School Council, Sônia (M9) and Vilma (M10), come to the school every time they are invited to a meeting and participate in any school event in which their presence as parent representative is required. At the Council they do not hold any special assignment such as secretary or note taker. They attend the meetings, discuss the issues, and give their opinion on how matters should be settled. Sônia reported that:

Because I have been participating in the school for 5 years all students and their parents know me and they frequently ask me to intervene on their behalf with the principal and with the teachers. So I schedule meetings, organize informal talks between mothers and teachers, and talk to the school counselor about students who are having disciplinary problems. At the time of the CPM I worked once a week selling snacks during recess and helped organize all fund-raising festivities. But you know, I am one of the few mothers who have free access to the school, so I come often to observe the students during recess, and also the work of teachers. I sometimes reproach students when I see bad behavior, Like I do with my own children, and I complain to the principal when I see that teachers are late. But I also help teachers, for example, I stay in the class when they have to leave for some reason.

Sônia also comes to the school to deliver orders from her sewing activity, since most of her clients are teachers, school professionals and staff. Although she is often invited to meetings at the Department of Education, she reported that she rarely goes there, due to lack of transportation and the fact that they are sometimes held in the evenings, a time her husband expects her to be home.

Vilma (M10) said that it took her almost two years to learn the appropriate language and behavior necessary to participate in the School Council. She now feels more comfortable in participating in the discussions and in expressing her opinions. Vilma complained that other parents demand a more active role from her in the School Council, but do so informally at the school gate and do not attend the meetings she and Sônia organize to discuss parental issues at the school. She has attended several meetings at the Department of Education and thinks that some of them were a waste of time, since most parental representatives do not understand the language used by the professionals to explain important issues about the school reform.

Mara (M11) reported that she was responsible for planning and organizing all fund raising activities during her four-year term as president of the CPM, and she particularly enjoyed organizing field trips with students. She said that she was good at raising money from small business owners in the community in order to rent a bus to take students to different places in town. During her time at the CPM Mara began to video tape field trips and school festivities and to sell the tapes to other parents. Mara attended several meetings and conferences organized to promote the exchange of experiences among parents and teachers of CPMs across the state and even across the country. In fact, sponsored by the CPM she attended a conference in Argentina, which was her first and only trip abroad.

Mara was elected as a parent representative for the School Council and participated for a year. In her words:

I can honestly say that I did a lot of things for that school. I raised money for everything, to fix a broken window, to buy fans for the classrooms; and not only for the classrooms that my daughters were attending, for all classrooms! We not only did things inside the school but had to visit people in the community that had money and convince them to help the school. I was really good at that. I got the bus company to rent buses for free, so that we could go on day trips with the kids. When we organized festivities I used to spend the whole day at the school, I did not come home until it was late at night!

**Gilda (M12)** started participating right after the Quarter School was inaugurated. Because the school was initially understaffed she helped the professionals give orientation on the enrollment process, assisting families in filling out admission forms and processing and organizing school files. Gilda said that there was a group of approximately 4 mothers and 4 teachers that got together to form the CPM and to start organizing the first festivity at the school. At that time, the school had no adequate funding, beyond the money for teachers' salaries and basic infra-structure; therefore the generation of extra funds assumed vital importance. She described that:

I helped to make products to be sold at school fund-raising bazaars and was a treasurer of the CPM for four years. We did everything, from baking and selling snacks during recess to holding raffles in the community! We were always looking for money to improve things in the school. But there was the good part too, we traveled! We went to a state conference about CPMs in another city, it was the only trip that I have ever taken without my family!

**Maria do Carmo's (M13)** participation in the CPM involved helping to organize the school festivities and preparing the products to be sold at the bazaars. She was responsible for buying the materials necessary to prepare the hand made products produced by the CPM, and currently is still in charge of buying the costumes and accessories for the dance club at the school. Maria do Carmo has actively participated in the last principal's

election, campaigning against the former principal whom she believed was too soft to handle the problems (drug-dealing and stealing) at the school. Maria do Carmo described her activities in the CPM as helping in everything that she could, and getting satisfaction from the feeling of being useful to the school.

Lena (M14) reported that during her time in the CPM she was responsible for buying the snacks which were sold to the students during recess. She worked at least once a week at the school selling them. She also organized the winter clothing bazaar and distributed what was not sold accordingly to the needs of students' families. Lena reported that:

We worked hard, as if it was our own house. But it was good to see that we were helping students who would not be able to come to school otherwise. There were days that I spent more time in the school than in my own house. Like for example in the beginning of the school year I helped in the admissions, talking to families about the documents that they needed to enroll their kids, how to fill out the application form. My husband even complained about that! But I also went to meetings in and out of town, and it was great! Besides having a lot of fun we learned a lot of things.

**Zenir** (M15) reported that her participation consisted of helping other mothers in all the activities they organized in the CPM. She helped sell snacks once a week or whenever other mothers asked her to come. Zenir said that because she was invited to join the CPM by her two friends Mara and Gilda, she depended on their directions to know what she was expected to do.

### **Effects of Participation for Individual Mothers**

Similar to the group of mothers in the Neighborhood School, mothers in the Quarter School reported a wide range of effects generated by the experience of participation. However, among the mothers who participated at the CPM there was the

general feeling that they contributed more to the school than they got something out of it, as illustrated by a phrase used by several of them, “*we did it, we participated at the school for love of the T-shirt*” [por amor à camiseta], which is a local expression meaning dedication to a cause without personal or secondary intentions.

The tendency to report first the most social desirable/politically legitimated effects of participation was also found among mothers in the Quarter School. In fact, apart from the effects related to socialization, mothers had initial difficulties in identifying ways in which participation had affected their lives. They could do it more easily in relation to one another, such as Lena (M14) describing how Mara (M11) increased her network for video taping after participation, then in relation to their own experiences. Here again the utilization of the three-interview series proved to be a valuable methodological tool for allowing mothers to reflect on their experiences of participation from multiple angles and on different occasions.

**Sônia** (M14) attributed to her experience of participation gaining a better understanding of the school environment and the work of teachers, which allowed her to intercede on behalf of her children, and other students, when she thought they were treated in an unfair or inappropriate manner. Another effect reported by Sônia was a change in her perception of professionals as unreachable and superior, which allowed her to establish closer relationships with them. These relationships have stimulated her to continue to participate and have helped her get some privileges, such as being able to enroll her son even when there were no more vacancies in pre-school. In her words:

I feel really good about myself when former students, or parents, stop in the streets and say that I have helped them during their time in the school. Because I work hard to make this school a better place for the kids. And let me tell you, some of the other mothers were not grateful. There was a lot of gossip within the group of mothers who participated. Some of them were really mean. But I have learned so much, I

have done so many things for this school that I feel good, nobody can take that away from me. (...) Now my relationship with the teachers is not like it used to be, they up there like gods and I down here. Now I can talk to them when I want, I know that they are people just like me and they see the same.

**Vilma (M10)** reported that through participation she has established a closer relationship with teachers and school professionals which has helped her assume a more proactive role in the school education of her two daughters. She is now more confident and knowledgeable about how and when she should interfere. Through a long and hard process Vilma reported learning the behavioral and communication skills necessary to be assertive and to have her opinions listened to by other people. She said that:

I have learned that I have to speak up, use the right words, to say what I have to say. I also feel more confident to say, hey I don't understand this! I think that nowadays if I go to a job interview I would do much better, I would know the right words and how to behave. That I learned in the School Council... one has to make a point very clear. That changed me, I was always afraid of what other people would think about me. Now I say what I have to say. They noticed in my house. My husband says that I am too bossy. But it is not that, on the contrary, now I know that it is important to talk, to have dialogue with my daughters, I learned that from some of the teachers here.

**Mara's (M11)** perception is that she has contributed much more to the school than she got in return. The only effect that she mentioned was making new friends and having fun. This initial response from Mara is paradoxical when compared to the perceptions of other mothers who participated at the same time in the Quarter School. They believe that Mara got a lot of recognition for her work, and had access to many opportunities which were new to her. The trip to Argentina is one example; other mothers reported that Mara was very excited and learned a lot during the trip, but she dismissed it as being just another fun and entertaining experience. The fact that during her time of participation she also started an income generating activity was initially also dismissed as unimportant, but

Mara later acknowledged that the informal taping of school events was a good way to gradually improve her skills without consumer pressure.

Let me think what I got out of participating in the school...to be honest I think that I have contributed more than got something out of it. I've told how much I worked for this school. But I have to say that it was a great time, I had so much fun. I made some good friends there, we are still friends. And I have learned how to deal with all kinds of people. Nowadays when I walk in the streets everybody knows me, they still like me. They often invite me to tape their celebrations, like weddings, baptism, birthday parties...

**Gilda (M12)** said that the most important effect of her experience of participation has been acquiring knowledge and skills which have helped her to be a better mother to her children. According to her, participating in school has improved her parenting skills in two ways: first through the contact with teachers, and second through contact with other people with higher educational attainment. Being a self-described learner by observing, Gilda reported that she has broadened her vocabulary and learned how to build a line of reasoning to defend her ideas. She mentioned that many times she asked her children's teachers to explain what they were teaching so she could talk about school subjects with her children at home. The second way in which Gilda reported improving her parenting skills was through the intense contact that she had with students, particularly with adolescents, at the school. She got involved in conflicts among the adolescents and said that she has learned effective ways to deal with them, even when issues of drug abuse and sexual behavior were involved. Gilda reported that through participation she increased her self-esteem through a sense of self-fulfillment, of feeling good about herself for doing something right and being appreciated for it. In her words:

I think that participating in the school was one of the best things I did in my life. Not only because I helped the school, but because I learned how to be a better mother to my children. I learned a lot from the principal, the teachers, and even from the other kids. I learned how important it is to listen to them, to be alert if they are going out with bad company. And I learned school stuff too. I used to say many



words wrong, not mentioning spell them! By talking to people with higher education I got their language, I got to express myself in a more correct and elegant way. And besides it was much better than staying at home alone and getting cranky. There I met a lot of people, felt that I was an important part of this community.

**Maria do Carmo (M13)** attributed to her experience of participation the acquisition of knowledge, both in terms of wisdom in interpersonal relationships and in improved parenting skills. She said that during the time she participated at the CPM she was exposed to different ideas and perspectives from other mothers, from teachers and school professionals which mobilized her to seek more learning opportunities. Maria do Carmo cited particularly the mobilization to get more formal education since she only went to school through the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. However, her plans to go back to school were prohibited by her husband who did not allow her to go out alone in the evenings. Another important effect cited by Maria do Carmo was the emotional support she got from the group of mothers at school. She is now under treatment for serious depression and the doctor told her she should get involved with social activities again. She is currently trying to create a mothers organization to support student cultural/dance activities at the school. She said:

One learns, Oh God, one learns. You learn so much by talking to others, we gain wisdom, we get to know more things. We don't gain money, they don't pay us, we go there by our own will, so what we really gain is knowledge...how to better raise our kids, how to solve our problems.(...) sometimes you are about something, are upset with something and you keep it to yourself. When you talk to someone else different ideas come up, and then you think, this person thinks differently, and then you cheer up, learning from other people about life, about different ways of survival.

**Lena (M14)** described intense and multiple effects of her experience of participation. She was particularly interested in describing all the different places and people she was exposed to during the time she participated in the CPM. Lena described with great detail the themes of the lectures and the people with higher educational

attainment she met at a CPM conference out of town. She attributed her wish to continue her formal education to this aspect of the experience of participation. Lena enrolled in evening classes last year but at the last minute was forbidden to go by her husband who did not want her to go out in the evenings; since she was not able to find adult classes during the day, she has given up the idea of continuing her education. Another important aspect reported by Lena relates to improvements in her self-esteem by the fact that she had to interact with people beyond the domestic realm. She said that the weekly meetings at the CPM provided her with a reason to dress up, put some lipstick on and get out of the house for a meaningful, and socially useful activity. Lena reported being sad after resigning from her position at the School Council but she could not accept being manipulated and not respected by school professionals. According to her:

Participating in the school was like waking up, to start living again after years of cooking, cleaning and ironing. I was so happy to get out and see that I could do something important, it even made me wish to go back to school. I met all those people, women with high education, speaking beautiful words, I felt that I wanted to be like them and if I went back to school I maybe like them. At first my husband said nothing, but when he saw me going out in the evening he said where do you think you are going? But never mind, I still learned a lot from those conferences about the CPMs. It was really sad that they finish it. This School Council is a joke, they say that parents can decide but it is not true, teachers and the principal decide.

**Zenir** (M15) did not identify many effects of her experience of participation rather than expanding her circle of friends and getting emotional support from other mothers. According to her, the fact that mothers talked about issues related to their relationship with spouses and children helped her learn new ways of dealing with her problems and provided a safe environment for her to share her own personal issues. Zenir also attributed the positive response to one request (a school place for her godson) to her previous

participation, although she thinks it is wrong to utilize the relationships she has established at the school to gain personal benefits. She said that:

One should not participate looking for gaining favors or privileges. We have to do it for the school and the children in our community. Looking back... what did I get out of it? I think I have learned a lot, made many friends, and many enemies too. The friends that I made there are my friends till now, and I share with them my problems and they give me advice. I think that's all.

The experience of participation of the group of mothers in the Quarter School is summarized in the Table 8.

Table 8- Forms of Participation and Major Effects for Mothers in the Quarter School

Name	Type of participation	Duration	Reason to start	Kind of contribution	Benefits/Effects*
M9	Member of the former CPM and the School Council (SC)	5 years	-Wanted to guarantee physical safety of her son.	-Volunteer in the snack bar -Represents parents in meetings at the Department of Education	-Closer relationships with teachers and the principal -Increased trust in the school environment -Privileges/priority in enrollment and access to school openings -Social recognition -Income generation opportunity (clients for sewing)
M10	Member of the School Council (SC)	2 years	-Invited by M9 who is her neighbor. Refused initially because thought would be just trouble.	-Attends School Council meetings -Helps parents at the school in arranging meetings with teachers and assisting with families' special demands	-Increased self-confidence -Improved communications skills (broadening vocabulary and constructing consistent arguments ) -Learned important child-rearing issues -More equality in relationship with husband/gender awareness
M11	Member and president of the former CPM	6 years	-Invited by the principal and thought that had an important contribution to give to the school.	-President of the CPM for 4 years -Organized festivities, contests, field trips and fund-raising activities -Represented the CPM in national and international conferences	-Social recognition -Making friends -Income generation opportunity (video-taping social events)
M12	Member of the CPM		-Invited by school professionals when the school opened	-Attended CPM meetings and helped to organize it's activities -Worked as mediator between school professionals and students in face of behavioral problems	-Increased self-esteem -Acquisition of knowledge and skills (learn better spelling and vocabulary) -Improvement of parenting skills through systematic contact with other adolescents and their parents

Name	Type of participation	Duration	Reason to start	Kind of contribution	Benefits/Effects
M13	Member of the CPM. Is a voluntary parent in the students' dance group.	4 years	-Invited by another mother of the CPM	-Attended CPM meetings and helped to organize its activities	-Emotional support -Improved parenting skills -Acquisition of knowledge/skills -Social recognition -Incentive to pursue higher educational attainment
M14	Member of the former CPM	8 years	-Invited by other mothers	-Attended CPM meetings and organized its activities -represented the CPM group in local conferences and meetings at the Secretary of Education	-Personal gratification -Exposure to different social contexts and people -Incentive to pursue higher educational attainment -Increased self-esteem -Income generation opportunity (knowing more prospective consumers)
M15	Member of the former CPM	6 years	-Invited by other mothers	-Attended CPM meetings and organized its activities -Organized fund-raising activities	-Making friends (with mothers and teachers) -Learning parenting skills -Social recognition -Access to resources

\* The list of effects presented here is the result of preliminary analysis of mothers' reports on their experience of participation

## **I- The General Effects of Participation**

The analysis of effects reported by mothers in the sample was performed looking for unifying meaning and dimensions across the effects and their specific significance in the lives of individual mothers.

As result of this analytical process four major categories of effects of participation could be identified: the first category includes effects related to mothers' personal enhancement and well-being, such as increased self-esteem and confidence, and access to the emotional support provided by being part of a group. The second category includes effects related to the acquisition of knowledge and skills through participation; the third category includes the effects related to the vertical and horizontal expansion of mothers' social networks, and the fourth is related to negative effects mothers associated with their experience of participation.

As a matter of fact, the category of effects described under the term 'the downside of participation' includes the negative aspects mothers attributed to their experience of participation. In the design of the study it was foreseen that social desirability issues (mothers trying to idealize their experience of participation and present a good picture of themselves) would constitute a serious threat to the validity of the data (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Weiss, 1994). Therefore, specific questions about the negative or unpleasant aspects of the experiences of participation were included in the interviews.

The analytical categories are not mutually exclusive, and in fact one effect may pertain to more than one category. Undoubtedly other forms of data organization and representation would be plausible. The major analytical challenge was to capture the broad

domains of effects of participation while maintaining the contextual frame necessary for understanding their meaning and impact on the life of each participating mother.

## **VII.1- Personal Enhancement and Well-Being**

All mothers in the sample referred to at least one effect pertaining to this category. Membership in a formal group at the school seems to have generated a wide range of effects in the way mothers perceive and feel about themselves. The most cited effects under this category were<sup>3</sup>: emotional support from peers (15); improved self-esteem (14); increased self-confidence (14), breaking social isolation (14); fulfilling the role of educational agents (12); guidance and counseling from school professionals (10); social recognition (9); and sense of empowerment (5).

Mothers reported personal enhancement and psychological well-being originating from a variety of sources.

First, an important source of feelings and behaviors which contributed to the well-being of mothers was breaking the social isolation of the domestic world and interacting with different people in a public space. Since almost all mothers in the sample do not hold jobs which require daily interactions with people outside their families, participating in the school constituted an unique opportunity to engage in such interactions and acquire new social skills.

The social interactions in the friendly environment at the school were considered by mothers as a crucial opportunity to break social isolation and improve their self-image and

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<sup>3</sup> The listing of effects presented here is the result of the analysis of the effects reported by mothers. The number in parentheses refers to the number of mothers that cited the effect.

self-esteem. Lena (M14), described how important participation was in making her feel good about herself, and also for other mothers. She stated:

Participating at the school you learn to like yourself more...because if you don't get out of the house you accommodate yourself, you don't care for the way you look. But when you have to go out everyday ....we did not dress in a sophisticated way to go to the school but we put on some make-up, lipstick, dress up a little, you learn how to take better care of yourself, to like yourself more, you learn to have a higher self esteem. There was a mother that her husband did not allow her to go to the CPM meetings, so she did all the house chores before leaving, dressed up and came to the school...she said that she needed that for her self-esteem...that she needed to do something for her.

Similar findings were reported by N. Stromquist (1997) in her study on the effects of a literacy program for a group of Brazilian women. Beyond the literacy gains participants described significant increase in their level of awareness, confidence and sense of competence. According to Stromquist, the literacy classes constituted an informal social club in which women could acquire important social skills in a relaxed environment:

The multiple purposes of the literacy classes for the women - a site for social distraction, a self-help-group, and an informal social club- satisfied long-standing needs and gave them the terrain to develop and practice desirable social skills such as speaking well, with fluidity and in a friendly atmosphere (p. 207).

Mothers participating at the Neighborhood and Quarter schools also mentioned that participation was a socially acceptable (and husband sanctioned) way to have fun and entertain themselves while doing something useful. Mothers participating in the Mothers' Club were particularly emphatic about how much they enjoyed the opportunity to get together at the school. Tamara (M5) was the mother who most emphatically reported that the access to the fun and relaxing space of interaction with other mothers was the major effect of participation in school. She said:

I don't miss a meeting...it is my time to have fun...I get so bored at home, where else would I go to be around my friends? We come here and relax, we talk about our kids, our husbands. My husband doesn't like to go out, and of course he doesn't



allow me to go out alone, but when I tell him I am going out with the girls from the Mothers' Club it's OK....he knows it is an all women's thing...he has no idea how much fun we have together.

Another way mothers reported getting personal satisfaction was through the fulfillment of the culturally determined educational role attributed to them as mothers. Actively participating mothers feel that they are contributing to the school education of their children by helping teachers and raising funds for the school. During the interviews many mothers referred to non-participating mothers as neglectful or incompetent, expressing a negative moral judgment towards mothers who fail to play the expected role in the education of their children. Eliane (M1) produced a long discourse on this theme, and said that as a low-income, poorly educated mother, the only way she could possibly contribute to the education of her children was through actively participating in the school. She reported that:

You know I participate because I want to show my kids that school is important, that I care for their welfare. I want them to have all, schooling, music classes...all...because being at the school they are not on the streets...I want them to learn good things...I will not be here forever and I want them to know that I want all the best for them...that's what I can do to help them to become somebody.

Maria do Carmo (M13) also reported that realizing she was contributing to the education of her children, despite her extremely low educational attainment, was a source of self-fulfillment which made her feel good about herself. She said:

I wish I had more education to help my kids with homework. I tried to enroll in evening classes but my husband tells me I should be at home in the evenings. So at least I do what I can, I go to the school during the day and help. At least I am doing something for their education, that's what a mother is supposed to do, isn't it?

Several researchers have demonstrated that parents' sense of efficacy as educational agents is strongly associated with their motivation to get involved in their child's education

(Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler 1995,1997; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994), and with the type and consistency of their participation (Epstein, 1986; Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Thus, feeling competent as a parent seems to be simultaneously a requisite and a consequence of participation in the school. For some mothers in the sample the perception of their responsibility in the education of their children was the drive to get involved in the school, while for others participation was an opportunity to learn how to be more effective parents. For both groups fulfilling the socially ascribed role of care givers and educational agents was a source of personal satisfaction.

The third way participation has affected mothers' personal enhancement and well-being was through the emotional support obtained through sharing experiences, feelings and doubts with other mothers and with school professionals. The formal membership in a group, and the establishment of close and trusting relationships constituted a safe environment in which mothers could share personal issues such as their relationships with their husbands and children, and their personal dilemmas as women. The emotional support reportedly came from the realization that they were not alone and that other women shared similar problems, and by getting specific advice and encouragement from other mothers. Vanilda (M8) was particularly emphatic about the emotional support she received from friends at the Mothers' Club, without which she thought she would not have been able to recover from a very serious psychological trauma. She said:

I have been through a very difficult period in my life...and the girls here helped a lot, they gave me all the support to recover my self-esteem....even the principal and V. were very nice...that's why I like the Club so much...because when I needed it everybody helped me.

Maria do Carmo (M13) also reported receiving a 'prescription' from her psychiatrist to get involved in the school again, because she needs the kind of emotional support provided by participating in a peer group. She reported that:

Now I am taking medication for depression...the doctor said I should go out and do things that I like and I liked when we had the group at the school. I need to feel that I am doing something useful, not just cooking and cleaning. Our group at the school was great, we listened to each other and tried to give good advice. Sometimes one would be desperate, thinking that their problem had no solution, but by talking we could show that there was a way out, that other people also had similar problems.

In summary, participation in schools seem to have affected mothers' personal enhancement and well-being by providing an environment for acquiring and performing new social skills, for having fun and relaxing, for allowing them to fulfill their role as educational agents, and by providing access to emotional support through peer interaction.

In a country like Brazil, where despite significant progress, the opportunities for women to participate in public institutions are still limited (Brasileiro, 1996; Stromquist, 1998), participation in schools seems to allow women to acquire the confidence necessary to engage in other modes of social participation. Estela (M2) provides a good example of how participation in the school has gradually prepared a previously shy and insecure homemaker to expand the universe of her participation.

Participation in the school was really the first step because participation at the association is much more complicated, there you have to solve the problems yourself. In the school we are part of a group that can discuss the problems...people at the association are much more direct, they want solutions and they can become hostile...it is much more political....it was good that I was able to learn how to deal with people at the school first....there (in the school) I learned to talk to all kinds of people...people with more education....with less education. See how many things changed in my life because of this school?

To further illustrate this point, W. Winters has reported a very interesting example of a low-income, over-burdened Afro-American mother for whom the first impact of

participation in her children's school has been in her self-image and social skills. Feeling more confident in her ability to be accepted and interact with people from different backgrounds allowed her become more involved in the school, and later to pursue educational and professional opportunities which were crucial for improving her life's chances (Winters, 1993).

## **VII.2- Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills**

Mothers reported that formal participation in the school has constituted an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills which have been important for their personal and professional development. It is important to note, however, that this was the category of effects which presented the greatest variability in terms of range and impact among the mothers in the sample. A discussion of the factors which seem to be related to this variability will be presented later.

The most frequently cited effects under this analytical category were to the acquisition of: better parenting skills (15); social skills for interpersonal relationships (14); knowledge about school functioning (10); market-oriented skills (8) broader vocabulary (5); literacy skills (5); and political awareness (5).

The effects related to the acquisition of knowledge and skills were organized in clusters according to content and practical application of what mothers reported learning through their experience of participation. Mothers often reported that the same set of skills could be applied for different purposes, and therefore the effects were included in more than one cluster.

The first set of skills and knowledge that all mothers reported acquiring through their experience of participation was related to child rearing and educational issues. Mothers reported that they learned both subject content and the skills children need to succeed in school as well as how to help their children obtain them. By coming to the school on a systematic basis mothers could observe more closely the routines and the kinds of interactions their children were exposed to at the school, and could provide more context specific guidance on how to succeed in such an environment. Eliane (M1) and Sônia (M9), for example, reported that by observing students during recess and by hearing what teachers said about students' academic performance they became better able to teach their children how to behave and defend themselves at school.

Sônia (M9) reported that:

During recess I used to walk around and observe what the kids were doing. I took care of the younger students, I learned to handle the older ones when they wanted to misbehave. The teachers sometimes asked me to stay in their classes when they had to leave for some reason...once my son's class had a problem with a teacher...she wanted to give failing grades to all of them...then I said –that's crazy. So we had a meeting and she explained the problem to all of them...I was the only mother who was present...but from that day on I learned exactly what teachers expect...and I tell it to my kids. The problem with the teacher was solved but I told them they should never misbehave like they did otherwise they would repeat the grade.

Vanilda (M8) attributes to participation the opportunity to take computer classes to help her son play with math games and thus acquire better math skills. Gilda (M12) asked her son's teacher to send materials home so she could also learn what she was teaching and talk to her son about the subject.

Another opportunity to learn parenting skills while participating in the school was created through discussions among the mothers about the best strategies for dealing with problems with their own children and other students at the school. These discussions

frequently involved sensitive issues such as drug use and sexual behavior, and mothers shared information and experiences about the most effective ways to deal with these problems. Many times, the principal and the school counselor were invited to participate in the discussions and brought professional information about child-rearing issues. Lena (M14) reported that:

When my daughter got pregnant she was very young, only 14. I was totally shocked and I told the other mothers they should be aware that the same thing could happen to their daughters. We talked about what we as mothers could do. We asked the principal for help and she organized a meeting to talk about teenager pregnancy. It was too late for me, but I think it opened the eyes of other mothers. I think we have all learned how important it is to talk with our children and get to know what is in their minds.

Another set of skills mothers reported acquiring through participation relates to social interactions at the interpersonal, family and social levels. Mothers reported that the multiple nature of social interactions at the school required a new repertoire of attitudes and behaviors which many of them did not previously possess. They referred primarily to the acquisition of negotiating skills to be applied within the group of mothers and between mothers and professionals at school. Mothers reported many conflicts among the mothers participating in each school, and the need to develop coping strategies in order to handle these conflicts in a civilized and polite manner. They also reported that in order to gain respect and be heard by professionals at the school, they had to learn to how to make a clear and concise exposition of their demands and points of view, and to present themselves as equal partners in working for school improvement. Teresa (M2) provided an interesting example of how mothers acquire, or at least perceive the need to acquire, this set of skills:

Did you see what happened yesterday in the School Council meeting? They (school personnel) wanted to give us only that little money...but we did not accept that. One thing that I have learned is that one has to be firm, to make clear what we want because we are mothers but we also work for the school, we give time and sweat to

improve things at school. So now I know that I have to speak up...I learned that...I have always been outgoing but now I have learned how to say things right, to use the right words...I go to the meetings at the Department of Education often...and there more than here you have to speak right....at the beginning I was not good at it but now I have learned...ask the other mothers...I know how to get the things we want.

Learning how to demand equal status in interpersonal relationships was reported by some mothers as one of the most important effects of their experience of participation. The idea of democratic relationships has expanded into other domains of their lives, and has influenced even their relationships with their spouses. Vilma (M10), for example, reported that learning how to make herself heard and respected at the School Council has prepared her to demand more equality in her relationship with her husband, and at the same time, to become less authoritarian with her daughters. She said:

Sometimes husbands think they are the big boss inside the house because they bring home the money...but now I know that I have the right to give my opinion...for example he didn't want to talk about sex with our daughters....but I said we should talk so they can learn the right things....it is better to start early and not let them learn the wrong things.

Another facet of the search for equality can be identified in the social awareness/consciousness which mothers attributed to their experience of participation. Several mothers reported that participation in a public school has made them aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and members of the community. They described as particularly important in generating this awareness the political discourse they were exposed to at the meetings and conferences at the Department of Education as well as the attitudes of some professionals, such as the principal of the Neighborhood School, who preached and acted consistently with the goal of raising the notion of citizenship for all members of the school community. Eliane (M1), Teresa (M3) and Noemi (M4) were particularly emphatic about the awareness of rights and responsibilities that participation in

the school has generated for them. Eliane said she is now better prepared to fight for the right of her children to obtain a good quality public education. She said:

To be honest I really don't care whether the teachers like or not the fact that we [mothers] are inside the school.....we have the right to be here...to supervise if they are doing a good job....this is a Citizen School....the name already says it...we are citizens and this school also belongs to us. Only through participation do things improve.

It has been argued that one of the most important aspects of participation in schools in recent democratic societies is to socialize parents and other community members in the values and practices of democracy (Coraggio, 1996; Urzua & de Puelles, 1997). The effects reported by mothers regarding the awareness of rights and responsibilities and their search for social equality seem to represent a recently acquired notion of citizenship, or 'political literacy', which is regarded as one of the most important pedagogical effects of participation (Avancine, 1992). Moreover, several mothers (particularly M2, M5 and M9) reported that participation in school was a learning experience for participation in other contexts, reaffirming the idea that certain skills necessary for social participation are acquired within the process of participation (Pateman, 1970).

Of the 15 mothers in the sample, 8 explicitly reported acquiring information and skills necessary for professional development, i.e., for finding formal employment and performing well in their jobs. Most of these mothers (5 out of 8) participate at the Neighborhood School where training workshops are consistently offered to parents. As effects of participation, the mothers mentioned the learning benefits derived from access to computer classes, which exposed them to the technology utilized in the work place and the development of negotiating skills which could help them in job interviews and in getting promotions at their work place.



In relation to the acquisition of a broader vocabulary and literacy skills mothers reported that the interaction with people from higher educational attainment, such as the principal and teachers, made them incorporate new words in their oral expression and to pay attention to the correct pronunciation and spelling of words. They also mentioned that participation in meetings with professionals made them improve their line of reasoning, in the sense of formulating concise and cogent arguments to defend their positions. Although the study did not empirically test the literacy level of participating mothers, observations during the interviews showed that some mothers seemed to possess higher oral language and literacy skills than expected from their level of educational attainment. In fact, differences in oral language could be perceived between mothers of the two schools. While mothers at the Neighborhood School displayed better performance in the domain of political and public terms, such as explaining the principle of democratic school management, mothers in the Quarter School seemed to maintain a more context-specific and local form of oral expression. Although it was not possible to infer any direct relationship between mothers' oral skills and the experience of participation, this finding seems to suggest that some mothers may have learned more formal and abstract language through their participation in schools. This form of language, it has been argued, requires some degree of identification with the public realm and may allow mothers to more easily access and understand information provided by professionals and the public media (Dexter, LeVine & Velasco, 1998).

Eliane (M1) constitutes a good example of the acquisition of oral and written skills through participation: although she has only finished elementary school, she displayed a vocabulary much broader and more sophisticated than people with the same educational

level. She also mentioned that her writing skills have improved significantly since she became responsible for the school's newsletter. She reported that:

At first I did not want to be responsible for the newsletter. I don't have a lot of education I know that I write some words wrong. But then the supervisor said that she would work with me. Sometimes I write things and she corrects the words that I spelled wrong. She also taught me how to use the dictionary, so when I am not sure how to write, or I want to use a more beautiful word, I go and look at the dictionary. Sometimes I get home and my husband says: What is the difficult word you have learned today? He says I am getting too snooty because I know all those sophisticated words.

Another example of the acquisition of literacy skills was provided by Estela (M2). She reported that because of the note-taking skills which she learned as a member of the School Council, she was invited to work at the local Residents Association. She reported that:

Learning how to be a secretary of the School Council was not easy! I had to pay attention to what people were saying, get what was most important and write it fast! Sometimes I went home to rewrite the whole thing, so that people could understand what I had written, and of course to correct the words that I had misspelled! But I have learned step by step. It is not something that many people know how to do, not an easy job! That's why I think the guys from the Association invited me to work there. Many folks with more education than myself don't know how to do it!

A crucial question which still needs to be addressed is how mothers acquired the knowledge and skills they attributed to their experience of participation. The specific learning process needs to be elucidated in order to identify the agents and methods which generated the acquisition of the cited knowledge, attitudes and skills. From mothers' accounts four important conditions/sources of learning could be identified:

- a) participation in courses and workshops specifically designed for mothers at the school, such as the computer classes;

- b) the systematic and long-term contact among a group of mothers around a shared goal, which allowed for significant horizontal exchange of wisdom and practical experience among peers;
- c) the frequent and closer relationships with persons with higher educational attainment such as principals, teachers and other school professionals who were willing to share their knowledge and skills with the mothers;
- d) exposure to formal learning experiences at the Department of Education and at events promoted by the municipal administration, which were designed to prepare and mobilize citizens for more active social participation.

### **VII.3- Horizontal and Vertical Expansion of Social Networks**

Under this category are the effects of participation reported by mothers which relate to the changes in their social networks both in terms of horizontal extension and vertical scope. Mothers reported the following effects within this category: making new friends (15); reaching prospective clients for home made products and services (12); closer relationships with school professionals and with people from higher SES (13); and access to far-reaching resources (8).

As previously discussed in the other categories, expanding the circle of friends was an important and often mentioned effect of participation for all mothers. Participation seems to constitute a strategic avenue for socialization to this predominantly married and homemaker group of women. Involvement in a formal modality of participation at the school functioned as an effective way of expanding horizontally the social network for the establishment of new friendships; for obtaining emotional support; and most importantly, for contacting and reaching potential consumers for home-made products and services mothers produced. Vanilda (M8)

provided a good example of how the horizontal expansion of her social network may facilitate economic activities:

When my son was born I stopped working, and since then I have been looking for something I could do. People at the school love my food, I always cooked for all the parties at the school. So they started asking me to cater for their parties, at their homes. So nowadays I bake cakes and other types of food for parties. Most of my clients are mothers from the school or people they refer to me.

A vertical expansion of mothers' social networks could also be identified through the effects of participation mothers reported. Some mothers established close relationships with teachers and school professionals which constituted qualitatively different social ties in their lives. Noemi (M4) for example, reported that the Vice-principal at the Neighborhood School helped her get the information required for the public selection of teachers and provided insider's tips on the criteria for the selection. Estela (M2) received similar orientation about with whom she should talk at the Department of Education in order to get a college scholarship for her daughter.

Beyond receiving personal favors, participation has allowed mothers to be exposed to and establish links with people with whom otherwise they would have minimum chances to interact with. Lena (M14) for example, described with great detail the professionals that she met at the CPM's conferences:

They were really very important people, very up there. Up to now I keep their business cards. You should have seen their way of talking, dressing and behaving. I never thought I would be in the same room with people like that. And the best of all is that they were people like us, they were actually interested in hearing what we were doing at the school.

Teresa (M3) also mentioned that:

By participating we (mothers) meet people that one would never imagined we would, like they Mayor for example. Do you believe I have met him?....we went to his office and we go to many other meetings with representatives of other schools. We met with a lot of important people.

The best example of the vertical expansion of social network is provided by Estela. Through the contacts she established at the Department of Education, she was recently selected to be the community coordinator of a municipal adult literacy program. Despite the fact that she does not have a high school education, Estela was reportedly selected based on referrals from professionals who had met her as a parental representative of the Neighborhood School. The experience of Estela is a clear example of how participation can help to build 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1982), or social contacts which bridge the restrained network of mothers to other social and professional networks. Estela was the only mother who kept in contact with me after the study was conducted. She called me several times to tell me how she was doing and to give me the news of her new job as community coordinator for the literacy program. She mentioned that I had the highest educational attainment of anyone she had ever met, and that she would like to keep our social relationship as close as possible.

In a country with huge social inequality such as Brazil, reducing the distances between different social classes through increased contact among them is no trivial task (IDB, 1998). In fact, this analytical category is one which addresses more directly the concept of social capital, or the benefits which can be derived from social relationships established through and for social participation (Portes, 1998; Coleman, 1987, 1988, 1991; Putnam, 1993).

#### **VII.4- The Downside of Participation**

The effects included under this category tended to be indirectly reported by mothers when they described feelings and attitudes during specific episodes of their participation in the school. The most frequently effects cited under this category were: feeling powerless

(7); feeling frustrated (6); feeling manipulated (8) and conflicts among mothers and between mothers and school professionals (7).

There was also a significant difference between the group of mothers participating in the Neighborhood School and the mothers in the Quarter School.

Mothers in the Neighborhood School tended to have a more positive view of their experience of participation than mothers in the Quarter School, including Sônia (M9) and Vilma (M10) who are still actively participating. There are two plausible explanations for this difference: mothers in the Quarter School had indeed a more negative experience of participation; or the fact that most of them had decided not to participate anymore had made them more critical of the kind of participation they experienced at the Quarter School.

In any case, the key answer to this question seems to reside in the type of overall context of participation provided in the two schools and the kind of leadership under which these contexts were organized.

The first cluster of negative effects includes feelings and perceptions of mothers that there were many things wrong inside the schools, and that they did not have the power to improve them. Mothers reported, for example, that some teachers were not really interested in teaching the students, were frequently absent, and did not impose any discipline inside classrooms. However, these teachers were protected by a professional collegiality which precluded any sanction for their conduct. Mothers' perception of being powerless in improving the education provided for their children was accompanied by feelings of frustration and anger. Similar feelings were reported by low-income mothers in Philadelphia, who got involved in the governance of schools but perceived a distance between getting a voice and getting a hearing (Fine, 1993).

Another cluster of effects included mothers' perceptions of being manipulated by principals, teachers and school professionals in order to legitimate their actions. Some mothers, particularly Vilma (M10), Mara (M11) and Lena (14) reported that they felt, on one or more occasions, like 'puppets' in the hands of professionals, and that their presence in the school served only to provide an aura of democratic school management. Mara (M11) reported her perception during one meeting at the school:

I think that they (principal and school personnel) wanted parents there just for decoration....just as show cases...I was not going to waste my time discussing the new school calendar because I felt that they had already decided what they were going to do...so why pretend they wanted our opinion? ...just because the Department of Education tells them to do so...that they have to listen to parents? This is not democracy....this is not a citizen school...they may pretend it is but we know it is not.

Other researchers have also demonstrated that sometimes parental participation is indeed structured in a way to maintain and reinforce teachers' and school professionals' control over school matters (Van Galen, 1986) and to establish good public relations with the community without sharing power (Anderson, 1998).

An important and often cited negative aspect of the experience of participation was related to the conflicts among participating mothers. Some mothers felt that they were discriminated against by other mothers and that there was a power dispute among them. The disputes involved who had the closest relationship with the principal, who decided the activities to be performed by mothers, and who represented the group at the Department of Education. At the Quarter School conflicts among mothers were reportedly strong and serious, and according to Sônia (M9), were the reason why many mothers stopped participating. All mothers (with the exception of Gilda, M12) reported having problems in relationships among mothers as well as between mothers and school personnel at the

Quarter School. At the Neighborhood School mothers reported a certain animosity between parents in general and the group of mothers at the Mothers' Club, who were perceived as too submissive to the principal's decisions. The intervention of the principal and other school professionals in the Neighborhood School (i.e. by setting clear boundaries and objectives for parents' participation, and thus setting a shared goal and conduct code among members of the school community), seemed to be an important element in abating the negative effects of the conflicts among mothers.

## **VIII- Discussion of Findings**

Among several possible ways to discuss the effects mothers reported from their experience of participation, two will be discussed in the present study. First, the findings will be discussed in terms of the personal characteristics and contextual variables which seem to be related to their generation and the way they impacted the lives of individual mothers. Secondly, the discussion will focus on the implications of the reported effects on personal, familial and social development.

### **VIII.1-Effects of Participation and Personal Characteristics**

While the small sample size, and the qualitative nature of the study do not allow for the investigation of empirical correlations between mothers' personal characteristics and the generation of specific effects, I have nonetheless looked for general trends in the way differences in the mothers' SES seem to be related to the type and intensity of the effects of participation they reported.



The two indicators of SES utilized were mothers' level of educational attainment and their reported income. The investigation of these two characteristics was conducted based on the extensive evidence found in literature showing that the relationships between parents and schools are deeply affected by parents' socio-economic status (Lareau, 1986; Klines-Dougan, Lopez, Nelson & Adelman, 1992). It has been argued, nevertheless, that the differences are much more a consequence of teachers' discriminatory practices of involvement than of parents' personal characteristics (Epstein, 1986; Snow et al., 1991; Kerbow & Chandra, 1993).

In terms of educational attainment there is quite a high variability among mothers in the sample. Educational attainment ranges from 4 to 13 years of formal education (Maria do Carmo M13 and Noemi M4 respectively), although the actual educational level represented by this range should be cautiously interpreted in face of the dramatic variability in the quality of education received by Brazilians while attending school (IDB, 1998).

In general, mothers with more education were less emphatic about the effects deriving from the experience of participation. Moreover, the effects they reported tended to be limited to the domain of personal enhancement and well being, with the exception of Noemi (M4) and Ana (M7) who were interested in learning specific aspects of school functioning for their professional careers. Mothers with a high school education (Teresa, Noemi, Ana, Vanilda, Vilma and Mara) tended to report more individualist and egocentric reasons to start participating, such as getting credentials for jobs (Noemi and Ana) or just ensuring a good education for their own children (Teresa). They also tended to perceive that they have made important and significant contributions to the school (Vanilda) and that they did not receive as much as they had given (Mara).

It seems that mothers with higher levels of educational attainment tend to make instrumental use of the experience of participation, i.e. they probably come to the school to get something specific out of it, such as making new friends or getting access to other social networks through the connections they establish with teachers and school professionals.

In contrast, participation seems to unravel a distinct plot for mothers with low educational attainment, such as those who have not completed elementary schooling (Tais, Maria do Carmo, Lena and Zenir). They reported numerous and strong effects deriving from their experience of formal participation in the school particularly in terms of acquisition of knowledge and skills. For some of these mothers, the skills acquired were actually an unexpected and surplus benefit deriving from their participation, since they started participating for altruistic or vaguely defined reasons, such as being invited by a friend.

A similar line of reasoning may be applied to explain the differences in mothers' reported effects according to their income. As previously stated, the reported income by the mothers may not reflect the total income of the family since many of them hold informal jobs or are involved in income generating activities. The four mothers with a clearly higher income (Noemi, Tamara, Vanilda and Mara) tended to report limited and specific effects of participation. Tamara and Vanilda put greater emphasis on the socializing and the friendships they established at the Mothers' Club, while Mara dismissed any important personal effect of participation other than having fun and making new friends.

In summary, actively participating in school seems to generate stronger and more numerous effects for mothers with lower educational attainment and income. It should not be interpreted, however, that mothers with higher socio-economic status do not report

effects from their experience of participation. Independent of the level of educational attainment and income, all mothers reported that participation has enabled them to contribute to the school education of their children and thus to fulfill their role as caretakers and educational agents. Moreover, participation has provided a socially accepted way to socialize which was very important for mothers' psychological well-being. And in some cases, such as for Noemi, Ana and Vanilda, participation in school also may represent a gateway to a professional career of higher status than any mother in the sample currently possesses.

In his quantitative study on the impact of participation on the lives of a much larger sample, Salisbury (1980) also concluded that no demographic variable was consistently and directly correlated to the generation of effects of participation in schools. Based on the evidence from his study he concluded that, regardless of personal background participation in schools does generate effects for all those who actively participate. He further asserts that the more active the person is, the greater the impact of participation. Although no objective measure of the amount of participation was used in this study, self-reported data supports Salisbury's assertion. Eliane (M1) and Estela (M2) who reported high levels and almost daily participation in the school were the mothers who reported the most intense, diverse and long-lasting effects of participation.

## **VIII.2-Reported Effects and the Contexts of Participation**

The Neighborhood and the Quarter School provided very different contexts of participation for mothers, which seems to be related to the intensity and range of effects generated for individual mothers.

In the Neighborhood School mothers could formally participate in two different modalities (Mothers' Club and School Council), had overt support and encouragement from the principal and school professionals to participate, and engaged in multiple activities (both for the school's benefit and for their own benefit) such as learning workshops and computer classes. In fact, the development of activities specifically designed for mothers demonstrated the interest of the principal and school personnel in making the school a learning environment for parents as well as for children. Mothers were encouraged to move from one modality of participation to the other and received orientation from peers and school professionals on the skills required to actively participate in different modalities.

In the Quarter School, formal parental participation is currently limited to the School Council in which parents have been underrepresented for the last two years. There is no official discourse nor personal commitment from the principal and the teachers to encourage more participation in the school beyond the request that parents comply with the school's norms and enforce them with their children. The previous modality of participation, the CPM, performed a very traditional and limited role of fund-raising, although mothers felt that they had more autonomy and power at the CPM than they do presently at the School Council. There is a general perception, both by mothers who participate in it and those who do not, that the School Council is actually governed by the principal, teachers and school professionals and that parents are expected only to legitimate their decisions.

*What consequences would exposure to such different contexts of participation have on the effects of participation mothers reported?*

As a group, mothers participating in the Neighborhood School reported a higher number and more diverse effects of participation. They also reported more effects deriving

from closer relationships with the principal, teachers and school professionals, implying a more intense interaction among the two groups. In the Neighborhood School a greater impact of the experience of participation on the lives of certain mothers was reported, particularly in terms of preparing and mobilizing mothers for participation in other contexts. As already mentioned, Eliane (M1), Estela (M2) and Teresa (M3) reported that participation in the school constituted a friendly learning experience which prepared them to participate in the male dominated, politically hostile environments of the Residents' Association and the Participatory Budget Committee.

The group of mothers in the Quarter School was, in general, less emphatic about positive effects of their experience of participation. With the exception of Gilda (M12), Maria do Carmo (M13) and Lena (M14), for whom participation had a great impact in their self-image and mobilized them to engage in other forms of participation, mothers tended to report self-contained and specific effects. For example, different from the Neighborhood School, mothers did not consistently report closer relationships with professionals at the school. The interactions at the school were usually characterized by conflicts, which according to the perspective of school personnel, were created by mothers' interference in school functioning, such as their comments on teachers' delay in starting classes.

The evidence generated from the present study, and the growing literature on the contexts of participation which are being created in democratic societies (Schaeffer, 1992; Kliksberg, 1997; Urzua & de Puelles, 1997; Gadotti & Romão, 1997), suggests that some specific elements in the school environment are more conducive to authentic forms of participation, and in turn, are more propitious to the generation of positive effects for those who participate. In contrast, the existence of barriers to participation impede or hinder the generation of such effects.

In a discussion on the obstacles to greater social participation in Latin America, Kliksberg (1997) cites two major types of barriers to people's participation in public institutions: the structural and the institutional. The structural barriers are those related to the widespread poverty in the region which strains individuals through the daily struggle for basic survival and spares no time or energy to be invested in social participation. According to Kliksberg, poverty is also responsible for the disintegration of the social fabric, making families less available and able to perform their caregiver role for children.

The institutional barriers to participation are those intrinsic to the organization and management of public institutions which impede the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. Among several institutional barriers Kliksberg cites the rigid vertical hierarchy, the tendency to manipulate and exploit individuals with lower educational attainment or social status, and the inability to listen to people's real demands and expectations.

Several researchers have warned of the need to examine the contexts of participation offered in public schools not only in terms of the formal structures offered (such as the existence of School Councils and PTAs) but more importantly, in the 'micro politics' or the social interactions which happen inside the schools.

### **VIII.3-Contextual Elements Related to the Generation of Positive Effects**

As previously stated, the small scale, qualitative nature of the study does not allow for the generalization of findings to a larger universe of the schools. However, during the course of the interviews mothers mentioned several features of the contexts of participation which, according to them, were directly related to the effects that participation had generated. Based on mothers' reports, and the educational literature discussing the contexts of participation provided by schools (Fine, 1993; Paro, 1997; Anderson, 1998), the

following elements of the contexts of participation were identified as crucial to the generation of positive effects:

**a) Leadership**

Principals' attitudes and behavior towards the presence of parents in the school were frequently cited as an important element in making participation a good experience for mothers. According to mothers, principals' personal and professional characteristics, such as respect for people from all backgrounds, willingness to listen to mothers, and ability to coordinate the work of all members of the school, are crucial in making the participation of parents productive both for the school and the mothers.

The involvement of professionals in the school, particularly the principal, was also essential in organizing the participation of the mothers at the school setting. This organization does not mean control and over-structuring that is incompatible with authentic participation (Van Galen, 1986), but is essential to set the boundaries indispensable to promote democratic and productive interaction among the different actors in the school (David, Edwards, Hughes & Ribbens, 1993).

Moreover, from the 15 mothers interviewed 7 were invited to participate by the principal or another school professional, suggesting that school personnel's attitudes towards parents was an important factor in attracting parents to, or repelling parents from, more active participation in the school. The principal was also instrumental in identifying mothers' needs and demands and creating opportunities to meet those demands through activities such as the training workshops offered at the Neighborhood School. As further evidence of the importance of the principal's leadership, mothers cited the variance in the

number of parents inside the schools depending on the school principal. This variance has been clearly noticed by the mothers in the Quarter School.

### **b) Several Modalities of Participation in the School**

According to the mothers interviewed, the provision of different modalities of participation was an important factor in their decision to start, or continue to participate in the schools. Mothers acknowledged that they have distinct interests and abilities and that it is important to provide several possibilities of involvement.

The failure to recognize that parents have different motivations (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994) and are willing to participate in different forms may prevent many parents from participating more actively in schools (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Parents with low educational attainment may feel insecure about their abilities to perform different roles at the school, and about how to interact properly with school professionals (Winters, 1993) and therefore may avoid getting more actively involved in schools (Comer, 1993).

Mothers in the Neighborhood School reported that the opportunity to participate in the Mothers' Club as a first step in the preparation for participating in the School Council was crucial to their decision to participate. School Councils are still regarded as a bureaucratic structure dominated by school professionals which makes many parents unwilling or fearful of participating. Several mothers declared the need to have informal spaces for participation, in which they could learn the skills perceived as necessary to participate actively in more formal modalities of participation.



### **e) Provision of Learning Opportunities**

Mothers' reported that schools' provision of learning opportunities for them was an important element in creating positive effects from participation and a key incentive to continue participating. The learning workshops were mentioned by mothers as a reason to continue participating for longer periods and to recruit new mothers to school. Mothers seemed to appreciate the workshops which exposed them to new skills, such as computer classes, but also the workshops in which they learned traditional feminine manual skills.

Nevertheless, mothers also mentioned informal learning opportunities such as those created by the interactions with school professionals. Several mothers mentioned learning oral language and literacy skills directly from teachers with whom they worked. These interactions also constituted important learning opportunities for mothers in the sense of preparing them for other forms of participation. Mothers often referred to the importance of 'learning to participate' and greatly appreciated when professionals from the school took the time and commitment to teach them how to participate more effectively.

Many women in developing countries have not finished their formal schooling (Heward & Bunwaree, 1998), and therefore participation in the school education of their children constitutes a strategic moment to provide access to knowledge and skills which can be crucial for their personal and economic development (EFA/Unicef, 1993). Moreover, in countries with a tradition of low social participation, special attention should be given to the provision of opportunities to learn and practice the skills required for effective participation.

### **c) Authentic local and democratic school management**

According to mothers, the perception that they can make a difference in the school is a *sine qua non* condition to make participation a good experience. Mothers referred to feelings of manipulation and frustration deriving from the perception that the structure in the school was too rigid and inflexible, and would not change with mothers' participation. Mothers whose participation has produced visible changes (for example, the creation of a band in the Neighborhood School organized by mothers) reported a higher number and more intense effects of participation. On the other hand the termination of the Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM) in the Quarter School was cited by mothers as indisputable evidence that they have no power, and are not even consulted, over the decision-making process in the school.

Researchers (Midgley, 1993; Kliksberg, 1997) have shown that there is a 'frustration effect' associated with social participation in Latin America derived from the perception that common citizens have no control or power over social institutions. In fact, one of the most prevalent negative effects of participation cited by mothers in the sample was the feeling of powerless for not being able to change things at the school (Fine, 1993; Anderson, 1998).

The mothers interviewed acknowledged that they live in a city that encourages citizen participation. However even in a city like Porto Alegre, where every school community is invited to participate in the discussion of major educational issues, some mothers feel that individuals, in the position of a school principal or teacher, can create obstacles to parental participation in schools. These obstacles, they claim, are at the level of interpersonal relationships and the way power is distributed among members of the school community. In discussing how to make the experience of participation more meaningful for

parents, and effective for schools, Comer and Haynes (1991) argued that parental involvement programs that are instituted in traditional bureaucratic and inflexible school environments are less likely to generate positive results than those that are part of a more collaborative organizational structure.

## **IX-Implications of the Effects Generated by Participation for Personal, Family and Community Development**

In order to assess the validity of the claims that participation generates benefits for individuals who participate, and also for their families and the communities in which they live, it is necessary to discuss the impact of effects reported by mothers in these three domains. The discussion presented in this section draws upon the conceptual framework of social capital, which proposes the idea that the social relationships established through participation constitute an important resource for individuals (Bourdieu, 1986; 1998), families (Coleman, 1987, 1988, 1991) and communities (Wehlage & White, 1995; Putnam, 1993; 1995).

### **IX.1- Effects of Participation for Personal Development**

How participation has contributed to mothers' personal development has been already discussed particularly under the analytical categories of reported effects. Mothers seem to have derived from their experience of participation important elements for their development as women, mothers and citizens. Through their participation in schools this group of women was able to pursue opportunities to increase their self-esteem, to acquire knowledge and skills, and to expand their social network.

Given the cultural context in which this group of Brazilian women live, which implicitly favors the feminine domestic and care-taker role, the horizontal and vertical expansion of mothers' networks seems to acquire special significance in promoting their personal development. Through participation, mothers seem to have expanded both their personal and public networks (Croninger & Lee, 1996), which exposed them to contexts which require the acquisition of new and important skills. Among these skills are the ability to negotiate and fight for a voice among people with higher educational attainment than themselves, to get involved in the politics and policies which affect the education of their children, and to break some of the barriers that prevent them from having a more active role in the life of their communities (Stromquist, 1995; French, 1996).

In relation to the claim that mothers could build social capital through their participation in schools (Coleman, 1991; Braatz & Putnam, 1997), and thus improve their chances for personal development, the findings indicate that some mothers did benefit from specific features of the social relationships established for and through participation.

It can be argued that mothers in the sample have generated social capital for themselves in a least two ways: first, membership in a formal women's group has enabled them to draw upon the trust and reciprocity of the group to obtain emotional support and learn from candid discussions of personal problems. Coleman (1988) argued that among the features of social relations that can constitute resources for individuals are obligations, expectations and trustworthiness among group members and the "potential of information that inheres in social relations" (p.S102). All mothers in the sample cited at least one effect related to how these features of the social relationships with other mothers allowed for the provision of the support and counseling needed to their psychological well being. Mothers' psychological well-being was reflected in feelings of increased self-esteem and self-confidence which are crucial for

seeking and engaging in opportunities for personal development. Emotional support deriving from group membership is a resource which should not be underestimated. For many women, child-rearing responsibilities and restraint to the home environment can be conducive to alienation from social reality, depression and low self-esteem (Winters, 1993). These psychological states, when combined with a cultural context which does not stimulate women to assume important roles in the public and political spheres of their communities (Stromquist, 1997), may lead to further limitations in opportunities for women's development.

The second way in which mothers may have generated social capital was through the social relationships established with principals, teachers and other school professionals. These relationships were a source of learning important knowledge and skills which, for some mothers, were instrumental in the pursuit of social and professional opportunities. In some cases, the relationships established with school professionals also served as a bridge to far distant social networks. As members of the School Council mothers attended meetings and conferences during which they were introduced to other professionals and to people from higher socio-economic status. These people were gate-keepers of valuable resources which mothers could later draw upon. The best example is again Estela (M2), who met the right people and was assisted by school professionals in the process of successfully applying for a college scholarship for her daughter.

It is important to note however, that the degree to which mothers actually benefited from the social relationships established through participation seems to be related to the nature and quality of the relationships established in the school. For example, mothers in the Neighborhood School reported more and more intense effects of participation on the expansion of their social networks, as well as more benefits deriving from this expansion. The social

relationships established among mothers, and between mothers and school personnel at the Neighborhood School, were qualitatively different from the ones established at the Quarter School. The differential seems to be in the way that the principal, teachers and other school personnel interacted with parents as well as their attitudes towards the presence of parents inside the school.

Previous research has highlighted the need for a more critical discussion about the role of institutional agents in determining to what extent social relationships established at and through participation in public institutions can be resources for individuals (Evans, 1998; Wehlage & White, 1995). Behaviors and attitudes of school professionals may actually hinder parents' empowerment process through the establishment of authoritarian and manipulative relationships, which are antithetical to the development of social capital (Fine, 1993; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

The evidence generated by this study is insufficient to claim that women have gained sustainable social capital or that they have been 'empowered' by the experience of participation. A more systematic follow-up of what happened in the life of each mother would be necessary to support such a claim. However, considering that empowerment is not an end state, but a process in which women, and their environments, change in order to ensure equitable provision of basic rights (Heward & Bunwaree, 1998), the results of the study seem to indicate that some mothers in the sample have engaged in a process of change that may lead to greater personal development.

In describing the empowerment process engendered by participation in schools, Cohran and Dean (1991), identified a series of systematic changes. According to the authors, these changes happen initially in parents' perception of self. A second step involves changes in the relationships with others, both in close and in more distant social

networks. A third step is characterized by social action on behalf of the individual, family or the community.

A similar process of change seems to have happened to the mothers of the sample. Although there were significant differences in the type and intensity of this process of change for different mothers, the general trend seems to be analogous to the one described by Cochran and Dean. As effects of their experience of participation mothers cited changes in the way they perceived and felt about themselves, with particular emphasis on acquiring increased self-esteem and self-confidence. They also reported that their relationships with their spouses, their children and ultimately with school professionals, have been altered towards a more equitable distribution of power. And finally, as a third step in their process of change mothers mentioned their disposition to engage in other forms of community participation, and to seek educational and professional opportunities for their development.

Any discussion of women's empowerment, acquisition of social capital and personal development needs to take into consideration the influences of the cultural and social contexts in which they live. The traditional roles culturally assigned to women in different societies may explicitly, as in the case of some Arab countries, or implicitly as in the case of Latin America, create barriers to their personal development. Although a more in-depth discussion of gender issues is beyond the scope of this study, the findings seem to suggest that participation in schools may constitute a first step, a gateway to a process of social inclusion of women who have been isolated in the domestic domain. The fact that schools are the public institutions most closely linked to the culturally assigned role of mothers as educational agents may be an important factor in facilitating this process of social inclusion.

## **IX.2-Effects of Participation on Family Development**

Participation in schools is a social phenomenon in which the boundaries of the private and public are particularly blurred for a number of reasons. First, families and schools are intertwined in the process of children's education with overlapping and complementary roles (David, Edwards, Hughes & Ribbens, 1993). Second, when mothers become involved in formal forms of participation in the school they are simultaneously performing a caregiver's role for their own children and a role as citizens collaborating for the improvement of a public institution (French, 1996).

This interconnection between families and schools implies that the families of this group of Brazilian women were inevitably affected by their participation in the schools.

As previously discussed, one of the important effects of participation reported by mothers was the acquisition of parenting skills. Mothers perceived that their child-rearing skills were enhanced by the contact they had with other mothers, by interacting with other children and adolescents, and by the relationships established with school professionals.

The knowledge and skills acquired by mothers can be considered elements of family based social capital (Coleman, 1987, 1988 1991) which is expected to be a key resource in promoting children's development and learning (Braatz & Putnam, 1997; Teachman, Paasch and Carver, 1997). Coleman explicitly stated that what he meant by social capital in the family is the investments that parents make in the education of their children, including "the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child's growing up (1991, p.36).

According to this definition of social capital the relationships between mothers and children assume great importance. Mothers in the sample reported changes in their



relationship with their children in a direction which researchers have identified as conducive to social capital formation and to school learning (Coleman, 1981). For example, mothers reported being better prepared to help their children succeed in school because they now understand the skills and attitudes required to do so. In a few cases, mothers also reported that their closer relationship with teachers allowed for a continuous exchange of ideas on how to improve the academic performance of their children and for receiving specific guidance, and supporting materials, on how to engage in learning activities with their children at home.

The effects derived from the discussions among mothers about child-rearing issues can also be considered a source of family-based social capital. Mothers reported that by discussing different approaches to handling their children's behavioral or learning problems they have learned alternative ways to interact with their children. Most of the changes in child-rearing approaches reported by mothers involved establishing more democratic relationships with their children, in which practices such as dialogue and negotiation of limits were incorporated.

The tendency towards more democratic relationships within the family was also reflected in mothers' relationships with their husbands. Mothers reported that their increased confidence and self-esteem allowed them to fight for more equality in traditionally submissive marital relationships. They reported, for example, that they demanded participation in decisions over important matters affecting the family, and encouraged their husbands to share more child-rearing activities. Even when marital relationships were not altered, mothers reported that the relationships with their spouses were destabilized by their increased awareness of their rights as individuals.

The influence of mothers' participation in schools on families needs to be discussed also through a critical perspective. The argument that school professionals should 'educate' families on best child-rearing and educational practices fails to recognize the multi-dimensional nature, and the different styles, of parental involvement in the education of their children (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Dellagnelo, 1997). The key question which remains to be answered is how participation in schools can be a source of social capital for families, while respecting the private and culturally specific nature of family relationships.

### **IX.3- Effects of Participation for Community Development**

One strong theoretical strand within the social capital conceptual framework claims that participation in public institutions such as schools is conducive to communities' social and economic development (Putnam, 1993a; 1993b, 1995; Evans, 1996; Woolcock, 1998).

Although in the present study data on community level effects of participation was not collected, mothers' reports suggest some effects which manifested themselves in the communities they live.

First, 9 of the 15 mothers became involved in other community activities after or concurrently with their experience of participation at the school. In cases such as Estela (M2) and Lena (M14) the involvement was at the local Residents Association, a traditionally male-dominated political environment. Whether or not this form of civic engagement will produce stronger community ties still remains to be seen.

Second, mothers reported personal satisfaction from being recognized as active community members by other parents and neighbors. Although most mothers reported they would not deliberately use the social connections they established through participation to achieve personal benefits, they acknowledged that participation has given them a higher

status in the community. Mothers often referred to ‘becoming someone at the community’ and enjoyed being recognized and greeted on the streets.

When schools are considered the social unit for the concept of community some features of the social capital can be more easily identified. Particularly in the Neighborhood School, participation seemed to have increased the level of trust and reciprocity among the members (students, parents, teachers, school administrators and staff). Professionals at the Department of Education reported that the Neighborhood School applied for and received supplementary funds on several occasions because parents, teachers and students worked collaboratively on projects to improve the school and have successfully lobbied for the approval of their projects.

In the Quarter School the level of trust and reciprocity among community members and school personnel is much lower and parents’ participation is usually tense and conflictive. Interestingly, the community was seen as possessing high levels of social capital during the time the housing complex was taken over. The strong social ties and participation forged during that time among residents seems to have eroded, or at least not to have been transferred to the school setting. Although a more in-depth sociological analysis would be needed to explain this phenomenon, from the data collected a plausible hypothesis is that parents continued to be seen by the school personnel as the ‘out-laws’ or threats to the public order. The institutional barriers to social capital formation, particularly for low-income and cultural minority parents, have been described in several cultural contexts (Kerbow & Chandra, 1993; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Portes, 1998).

Although examples of benefits of stronger school-community ties for school improvement programs are abundant in the educational literature (Comer & Haynes, 1991; Stone & Wehlage, 1994; Wehlage & White, 1995) one should be cautious about the logical

circularity embedded in the idea of social capital both as a prerequisite and a result of the participation of parents inside schools (Portes, 1998). Even Robert Putnam, the main proponent of community based social capital, acknowledged that it is not clear how this form of social capital may influence educational outcomes (Braatz & Putnam, 1997).

#### **IX.4- Comments on Social Capital and Participation in Schools**

The focus of the present study on effects of participation as perceived by individuals who participate, and its small-scale qualitative design, make it unsuitable as a basis for proposing generalized claims in relation to the concept of social capital. Nonetheless, two points deserve to be highlighted as contributions to this still vaguely defined and excessively comprehensive theoretical framework. The contributions acquire special meaning in face of the growing utilization of social capital as the basis, or end product, of development projects by international agencies in developing countries like Brazil (Ritchey-Vance, 1996; Fiszbein & Lowden, 1999; Durston, 1999).

First, the concept of social relationships as investments in future personal benefits (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 1998) seems to be totally alien to the indigenous beliefs and cultural models of this group of Brazilian mothers. When asked if they regarded the social relationships they have established through participation as a resource on which they could draw in the future mothers responded with strong denial. They considered ethically wrong and socially destructive any individualistic drive or benefit from social participation. However, the analysis of the data has shown that mothers and their families did benefit from the social relationships established through and around participation in schools, which leaves the hypothesis that cultural beliefs and models attached other meaning and

interpretation to the phenomenon observed. The concept of social capital, as it is currently described in the literature (see Portes, 1998 for a comprehensive review), seems to acquire a different meaning or form for this group of Brazilian women.

The origins of the concept of social capital in economics, particularly Loury's and Bourdieu's conceptions of social capital resulting in financial capital, may partially explain its superficiality in terms of cultural variation (Portes, 1998). Putnam's work in Italy and his supposedly universal claim of 'civic engagement' as a vital element for social and economic development (Putnam, 1993<sup>a</sup>) may also have discouraged efforts to further investigate variations on how the concept of social capital is constructed and enacted in different cultures. In fact, even within the United States researchers have not been able to consistently capture, through objective measures, the variation in indicators of social capital suggested by its main proponents (Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1997; Hofferth, Boisjoly & Duncan, 1999; Paxton, 1999).

The reports of mothers seem to resonate more with the concept of 'bounded solidarity' which is referred to by Portes (1998) as a source of social capital because it links individuals with a common fate around a shared goal. The group of women in the sample perceived themselves as belonging to the same social class and facing similar difficulties in finding access to good educational opportunities, both for themselves and for their children. The value they attributed to their participation was more in terms of being part of a collective action, i.e. improving the public school, than an individualistic drive. The benefits derived from participation seemed to be connected to the solidarity among equals and the realization that people from other social classes (principals and teachers) could be 'bonded' or connected to them and their children through their work to improve the school. In other words, what brought this group of mothers together in collaboration with school

professionals was perceived as stronger and more meaningful than what they would derive from participation.

The logic and ideology underlying this perception is significantly different from a rational choice in creating an investment through participation. It constitutes an important cultural variation in the concept of social capital, which deserves closer investigation. In practical terms it means that efforts to increase social participation among low-income populations in countries like Brazil should be based more on promoting inclusion in collective actions than on the individual benefits potentially accomplished by it. Social relationships occur in various forms in every culture. What makes them resources for personal, family and community development seems to vary across cultures and still needs to be better illuminated.

The second point to be highlighted refers to the role of public institutions, such as schools, in generating and supporting social relationships that can generate social capital. The fact that social relationships around a shared goal facilitate collective action and can constitute a resource for individuals is hardly questionable. What is less clear are the nature and the context in which such social relationships can be established in different cultural settings. Bourdieu (1998) has long argued that the construction of social capital is a purposeful process which requires the institutionalization of group relations (Portes, 1998), but a discussion of the role of public institutions in the process of social capital generation has only recently been initiated (Stone & Wehlage, 1994; Evans, 1996). In fact, few researchers have engaged in a critical discussion about discriminatory practices in the accumulation of social capital and how institutional agents can impede the formation of constructive social relationships among participants of a public institution (Portes & Landolt, 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

The shift of focus from individuals to social institutions, and the shift in the explanations of why people do not establish trustful social relationships around public institutions represents an important step towards a more comprehensive understanding of social capital generation. Contrary to Putnam's idea of historical and cultural roots for civic engagement, which by the way would put Brazilian society in a very disfavored position (Putnam, 1995), researchers are now investigating the contextual variables linked with the ability to promote, establish and maintain trustful relationships among citizens which will generate benefits for them and their communities. Evans (1996) argued, for example, that the most probable missing ingredient in forging effective synergy between governmental actions and communities and strengthening local social capital "is a set of competent, engaged public institutions" (1996, p.1125). Drawing upon the work of Judith Tandler describing a successful community health program in Northeast Brazil, Evans argued that the preparation of professionals working in public institutions to establish trustful relationships with community members may enhance the potential for the generation of individual, institutional and community development.

It can be argued that schools should focus on their mission of promoting the academic development of children, and therefore should not invest time and energy in establishing constructive social relationships among citizens. This is a complex discussion, which resembles the argument of a trade-off between effectiveness and efficiency as a consequence of decentralization and increased local participation in schools (Prawda, 1993; Winkler, 1997). The truth is that there is little evidence that such a trade-off necessarily exists.

There is growing consensus around the idea that schools as educational institutions should serve all the members of the community (Wehlage & Stone, 1995), and should work

collaboratively with them in order to create 'learning communities' capable of preparing citizens for the educational and professional challenges of this new century (UNICEF/EFA, 1993).

In the specific case of Brazil, two elements seem to support the idea of making participation in school a learning and empowering experience for parents, particularly for mothers. First, participation in schools often constitutes a first experience of public action for women who have been limited to the private and domestic world of their households. Mothers may be encouraged to participate in schools because there is basic identification between the traditional feminine role of educational and care-taker agent, which abates the fearful perception of power and politics characteristic of the public domain (Stromquist, 1995).

Second, in many Brazilian communities schools are the public institutions with the closest physical location, and in which parents have a clear, and socially desirable, vested interest: the education of their children. Moreover, as a consequence of the principle of democratic school management adopted by most of the recent educational legislation, the number of parents participating in Brazilian public schools is likely to increase.

The presence of parents in schools reaffirms the existence of a window of opportunity to promote social relationships through which individuals can learn and exercise democratic practices, and create a context in which these social relationships can indeed constitute a resource for those who participate. The question of what parents get out of participation in schools should now be followed by the challenge of extending the positive benefits of participation to a higher number of parents, to the citizens who are devoting their time, energy and 'sweat' to improving schools.



## **X - Conclusion**

One of the most difficult tasks of researchers who conduct small-scale qualitative studies is to select, amidst the richness and depth of the data, the issues to be included in the conclusion section. Obviously, the most reliable and productive way to conclude a study is to return to its original research questions and examine to what extent evidence to answer them was generated.

Three clusters of results were generated by the present study. The first set of results relates to the contexts of participation that mothers were exposed to while participating in the school attended by their children. The second set relates to the effects that mothers attributed to their experience of participation. And the last set is composed by the analytical discussion of the implications of the reported effects.

In relation to the contexts of participation it was demonstrated that even within the same educational system, schools provide significantly different contexts for parental participation. In the Neighborhood School, where there were two modalities of participation and closer relationships between mothers and school professionals, mothers reported a wider range of positive effects deriving from experience of participation. In the Quarter School, more limited and less intense effects were reported and mothers were less enthusiastic about their experience of participation. These findings seem to suggest that one should look more carefully into the 'micro-politics' (Anderson, 1998) and the social relationships established among the key actors, than into the formal structures of participation in schools.

In terms of effects, mothers attributed to their experience of participation a wide range of effects. Women in the sample mentioned effects on their self-esteem and

psychological well-being, on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and on the expansion of their social networks. They also mentioned negative effects such as feeling frustrated and powerless for not being able to change things in the school, and being manipulated and discriminated against by professionals and other mothers. However, mothers tended to have an overall positive assessment of their experience of participation, particularly in terms of being exposed to different people and situations which mobilized them to break the social isolation of their domestic lives.

The intensity and extent of the effects of participation reported by mothers seemed to be linked to certain elements of the context of participation as well as to their personal characteristics. Poorer and less educated mothers seemed to have benefited the most from being involved in a school which promoted authentic forms of participation. The elements of the context of participation identified as related to positive effects included the kind of leadership exercised by principals and school professionals, the provision of several modalities of participation in the school, the provision of learning opportunities for parents, and the participation in an authentic democratic form of school management.

The discussion of the implications of the reported effects was based on the premise that the social relationships established for and through participation were a potential source of social capital for mothers, as well as for their families and communities. The findings indicate that mothers, in some cases, have generated social capital for themselves and their families, in the form of emotional support, improved child-rearing practices and access to resources. Though community based social capital was not a major focus of the study, there were indications that the participation in the school was a first step towards a more active involvement in other community organizations.

The framework of social capital was then discussed through a critical perspective, which highlighted the logical circularity of some of its assumptions, and its lack of cultural resonance among the participants of the study. It seems that the logic underlying mobilization for participation in schools among this group of Brazilian mothers was related more to the inclusion in collective actions than to a rational investment in future resources.

Probably the most important lesson to be extracted from this study is that participation in schools entails the potential to provide, particularly for women with low levels of education and devoted primarily to their child-rearing responsibilities, opportunities for learning the skills necessary to assume a more pro-active role in their private and public lives.

However, this potential within participation is not self-accomplishing. Ideological stances, both in favor and against participation, have prevented us from seeing that authentic participation demands time and energy from all the individuals involved and requires political and ethical commitment to happen. Almost half a century ago, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1992; 1996) had already defended the idea that participation in schools should be used as a means to promote the development of parents and schools, and that the contexts of participation created inside the schools are key environments for the consolidation of democracy.

The voices of women conveyed by this study, although representing a very small percentage of mothers of school-aged children, support the idea participation in schools can constitute an important opportunity to promote their personal and professional development. This opportunity, along with other public policies designed to increase the participation of women in all areas of society, needs to be further explored in order to fulfill the promise of participation for individuals, families and communities.

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## **Appendix**

### **Profile of Participating Mothers**

**Profile: Eliane (M1)**

**Age: 33 Married, 2 kids (8 and 10)**

**Occupation: homemaker**

Eliane is considered the most actively participating mother at the Neighborhood School. She is a member of the Mothers' Club and the School Council. Her friends and husband say that she spends more time at the school than in her own house. At 33, two children, without a high school education, her life seems organized around school activities. She enrolled her children in all after school classes offered by the school. She takes computer classes, and edits (with the help of a teacher) the parents' newsletter. Eliane said that she participates so actively because the school is a friendly and familiar environment, different from other community organizations where people tend to be "hostile and angry". According to her:

For me this school is like a family. I know everybody, we talk... it is good because it was not like before that the principal and teachers were up there and we could not even think of talking to them....here if I see something wrong I go and talk to them...they are very open...it feels like a family.

She mentioned often that she has learned about her rights and responsibility to participate in the school in order to provide a quality public education for her children. She said that the current school principal always tell parents about their right to participate, but many parents do not feel motivate to get involved in the school. According to her:

The principal is doing her part. She is always talking about citizenship, about the right that we as parents have to learn more about what is going on inside the school. But she also talks about the responsibility, and many parents do not want to do their part. They just want to complain. That's not the way things improve. If we want to be true citizens, we have to do our part. I know that I am doing my part, that in a way I am contributing to the education of my children.

Eliane reported that after she started to participate she changed her views about teachers and school professionals and now thinks more positively about their work. She is able now to "see both sides":

Now I know that teachers have their problems too, that their work is not easy. I still think that parents should keep their eyes open, to see how the teachers are teaching their kids. But some parents are not easy, one day I did a home visit, to ask a mother, whom the teacher had asked to come to school several times, to come and talk about her son. He was in real trouble in the school. The woman was not even interested in listening to me!

When asked for the major motivation for participating Eliane mentioned that:

The courses that I take here are good...it is always important to learn new things, you can not stay in that monotonous domestic life...cooking, cleaning, ironing. I think it is good to meet new people...here at the club we always listen to each other's problems and we try to do what we can to alleviate the problems. The truth is that I love being here, I have a great time!

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M1**

### **learning new vocabulary**

"in the first meeting of the School Council I was silent because they used a lot of words that I didn't know...now I understand what they mean and I have learned to speak like them , of course sometimes I still misspell words. ..but it is OK I am still learning."

"I was afraid I would not be able to participate in the School Council because I don't have a lot of education, but the principal said I would be all right...so I am learning step by step."

### **learning the concept ( and discourse) of citizenship**

"in all the meetings that I go we hear that the community has to participate...but that's not happening in many places. I think most parents don't know that we have the right to make sure our kids get a good education...that's the only thing I can do for my kids....the teachers will have to accept me."

"a citizen school means that the community needs to participate, to make sure that the education being provided is good. I think people don't understand this. I know I didn't. I was totally unaware that I needed to participate, that I could do something for the school. I used to think, what I could possibly do? What could I do to help people with much more education than myself? But now I know that there is always a way I can help the principal and the teachers."

### **improved self-esteem**

"I was very shy, you would not recognize me. I was always in a corner...now my husband says that I look like a sergeant...always speaking up and fighting for what I think it is right."

" in the other day I was with my kids in a public event and the city Mayor looked at me and smiled! Can you believe it? My kids were so proud of me...that I personally knew that Mayor...I told them your mother is important!"

### **learning new skills**

"I love the computer classes, I am slow to learn...but it is so much fun.....I am typing the parent's newsletter in the computer now...it looks really nice....I often stay overtime to learn more, I am becoming addicted to computers (laughs)! I may learn really well and ...who knows? Even get a job as a secretary or something like that."

"It is good to learn tapestry and handcrafts...because if you need you can always sell your work and get some extra money...and make things for yourself too. To be honest I am not the kind of person who does a lot of manual work, but if the money gets really tight I may need to start doing things to sell."

### **exposure to new environments and social actors**

"last month I went to a meeting downtown at the Department of Education to discuss how things are going in public schools. We met with a lot of important people and with parents from the other schools. You know we went to represent the parents of this school, I never thought I would be in such meetings. It is a new experience for me."

**Profile Estela (M2)****Age: 38; Married: 4 children (from 5 to 18)****Occupation: domestic cleaner (part-time)**

Estela is considered the pioneer mother participating in the Neighborhood School. Although she is not currently attending the Mothers' Club all the other participants referred to her as the "example of an actively participating mother". At 38, without a high-school education, she is a member of the School Council and has been a parent representative since the school was founded 10 years ago. She has four children, a part-time job, and she is currently vice-president of the Residents' Association and a volunteer at the Catholic church. She reported that:

Although I have not the time to go the school as often as I used to go, I am glad to see that I set an example. My sister-in-law is the president of the Mothers' Club and I am the one who encouraged all other mothers to start participating. I still go the meetings of the School Council, but after I started participating in this school so many things changed in my life! I can say that a different person was born, that I am not that old Estela. I am involved in so many social activities that sometimes I think I will go crazy!

Estela reported that the knowledge and skills she acquired through participating in school have been very useful for her. She referred particularly to the ability to interact with people and oral and writing skills. She said that she feels more confident now in her ability to do any type of social work and reported that she is getting public recognition.

The guys from the Residents' Association came to my house to invite me to work with them....do you know I am the only woman there? They needed someone who can write good meeting reports and is good at talking to people. I think that people now know that I am good at these things. It is nice to get this kind of recognition. Now I have been invited to be the community coordinator of an adult literacy program. It is a program developed by the Department of Education! I felt really happy that they thought of me for this position.

In assessing her experience of participation Estela reported:

What else can I say? It changed my life...really. I became someone, do you know this feeling? And I realized that when my son got sick. I went to the hospital and the doctor said he had cancer and had to be operated immediately. I didn't return home. All of a sudden there were people in my house taking care of my other kids, cooking, cleaning...people that I didn't even know. But they knew me, they knew that I was Estela, the mother who was always helping at the school. And they felt motivated to help me. That is what I mean by becoming someone in your community.

**Major Reported Effects of Participation: M2****Participation in school as a learning experience**

"participation in school was really the first step...because participation in the association is much more complicated....there you have really to solve the problems yourself...in the school we are part of a group that can discuss the problems...people at the association they



are more direct...they want solutions...and they can become hostile....it is much more political ...it was good that I was able to learn how to deal with people at the school first.”

### **Increased self-confidence**

“I was shy...I panicked every time that I had to speak in front of an audience....I would get nervous, sweating even before leaving for the meeting ...nowadays I can even speak with the President ....I would enjoy the opportunity of talking to him.”

“I feel proud when people say that I have set an example of participation....not that I taught them how to do it...they learned by themselves...but they say I paved the way...I feel important when I hear that. I feel like someone that can teach other people to do things.”

### **Acquisition of skills**

**How to write records:** “the first time they asked me to take notes during the meeting ...my God , I had no idea how to do it...but I read the other ones and learned...nowadays I write really well...it is not simple you know?...you have to synthesize what is being said...get what is important, what is not.”

**How to talk to people:** “another important thing that I learned is to talk to people...all kinds of people...people with more education than I...and with less education....I know how to get people to say what they want to say...how to help them to express themselves better.”

### **Establishment of important relationships:**

**With school professionals:** “You know I don’t agree that all personal relationships are the same. When you have a talk with a person with more education they know how to analyze your problem beyond what you are telling them...they have a broader vision...that’s why sometimes it was important to talk with the school counselor...she gives another perspective on my problems.”

### **With other parents:**

**a) mediation:** “you know many mothers come to me and ask for help...I go with them to the school and solve their problems...one wanted me to get a place in pre-school for her son...another wanted to talk with the school counselor and I arranged the meeting for her.”

**b) set example of participation:** “I think I have planted a small seed of participation...probably I will not continue to participate so actively in the school like I used to do but I will leave other mothers doing so...I am happy to hear that other mothers are now working at the school”

### **With professionals at the Secretary of Education (SMED):**

“you know people there helped me to get a scholarship for my older daughter...you know I would not be able to pay for a private college...so they told what to do and where I should go to look for a scholarship...and she got it”

### **Professional Opportunities**

“see how many things changed in my life because of this school? I work at the association, at the church...OK, it is all voluntary work....I still have to work as a cleaner to make

money. But you know now I have a different relationship with my employer...I negotiated better wages...and she gives a lot of stuff...even sophisticated clothes that I don't have places to wear."

"Now I have this offer to be the community coordinator of the literacy program. I am sure that they could find people with more education for this position, but they wanted someone that had good relations in the community. And everybody knows me here, I have been around this school for so long!"

**Profile: Teresa (M3)**

**Age: 40; Married , 1 child (12)**

**Occupation: Homemaker, occasional day cleaner and seamstress**

Teresa is the president of the Mothers' Club and member of the School Council. She has participated in the school for the last 6 years. She has also participated as representative of her community in the Participatory Budget (OP). She helped to found the Mothers' Club and has been involved since her only daughter (12) was enrolled in pre-school. Teresa lost her parents at a very young age, and as an orphan had to struggle to finish high school while holding a low paying job.

I have always fought for what I wanted, that's what I am, a fighter. So in the school I try to make sure that mothers are heard, that we have our space. Last year for example there was no money for us. So I taught a handcraft workshop and donated the fees for the Club. I think that's why the other mothers wanted me to be the president of the Club, because they knew that I would fight all the battles for them.

As president of Mothers' Club Teresa has close contact with the principal and other school professionals. She said that:

Their door is always open to me...not to all mothers but to me...it doesn't matter to whom they are talking, they say 'come in and listen to this', I can always come in. So every problem that we have I go and talk to them. Some mothers also ask me to arrange meetings with the principal because they are too shy, or insecure, to do so.

Teresa seems to be an out-spoken and assertive person. During a School Council meeting she did not agree with the funds allocated to the Mothers' Club, arguing they were not sufficient.

Did you see last night? They want to give us only a little money...and let us raise the money for our activities, but when they need something they don't treat us like that. So I said come on...we need more money for next year to get more parents involved and do more interesting courses...they will agree...I know that.

An interesting fact not fully acknowledged by Teresa is that the school is an important alternative source of income for her:

The only thing I have not gained through participation is money....and I need that...But I always find a way....I prefer to be at school than to be at home by myself, thinking about my problems....at least here we get some fun and are close to our children.

Teresa made the curtains for the new cafeteria, and for all the classrooms charging market prices and asked (during the SC meeting) to be given preference to do any other paid job for the school. Besides performing direct jobs she uses the network of friends and

acquaintances made at the school to sell homemade products. Her cleaning job was also obtained through the help of a friend from school.

### **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M3**

#### **Acquisition of knowledge**

"I learned a lot of things...handmade work, things to do and sell. And we also learn things like how to write a document, and take notes during a meeting."

"we started the Club so we had to learn everything...we did the most difficult part...learn how to organize things, how to get funds for the things we wanted to do...you know sometimes we do fund-raising activities and the principal asks for our money to do things that are out of her budget...but we only agree if we want to."

#### **Gained sense of power**

"we have started the Mother's Club and the School Council....even if the principal goes away we are going to continue to exist...because we have power inside the school...a lot of power to do the things we want...nobody will take us out now."

"I think people admire us at the Department of Education because they see a group of actively participating mothers, who are doing everything for their kids and for the school. I think our school has a group of very active mothers....that gets their attention."

"you know one feels important to see that you have power...that people invite you to represent the school in citywide meetings...I feel good about myself...although I don't change my way of being...I am what I am...and they have to accept me."

#### **Expanded social network**

"you know by participating we meet people that you would never imagine we would...like the Mayor for example,...and the Secretary of Education. Do you believe that I have met him? We once attended a meeting at his office, we go to many other meetings in places like that."

#### **Access to knowledge and help from more educated persons**

"sometimes I want to talk to someone about a personal problem and instead talking to a neighbor, who would tell everybody about my problem, gossiping around...I can come and talk to one of the teachers or the counselor...they are much more qualified to give you advice and they are not going to tell your problem to everybody, unless they think that would help."

#### **Acquisition of income generating skills and network**

"in the workshops that I have participated I learned a lot of things that I can make at home and sell...I sell to the mothers of the Club...to teachers and staff...and to other mothers of the school...sometimes they refer me to other people who want to buy my stuff."

"one mother of the school recommended me to her employer...so now I do cleaning twice a week, it is extra money."

### Participation as an alternative source of income

“because they know me sometimes I am hired to do jobs for the school, like the curtains for the cafeteria...you know sometimes I even take my meals here...it is not allowed but because I work a lot for the school...sometimes without charge they let me have lunch here.”

“I can say that I have gained a lot of things through participation...but not money...some people think that we get paid...but it is not true....I only get some money when I do something like the curtains and the school band uniforms.”

### Profile Noemi (M4)

Age 34; Married, 2 children (9, 12)

Occupation: former pre-school teacher, currently homemaker

Although Noemi lives in the community where the Quarter School is located her children attend the Neighborhood School. She reported that she initially did not get a place for her children in the Quarter School and now she doesn't want to change schools because she is happy with the quality of the Neighborhood School.

What I found different here, and loved, is that we are used to seeing professionals on one side and parents and children on the other...here no it's more open...we are closer to them, and that facilitates even students' learning...the children see that we are involved in the school and they are more excited about it.

Noemi is a member of the Mothers' Club and the School Council. She is the mother with the highest educational attainment in the group (she started college) and has worked as a pre-school teacher before getting married. Although she actively participated in the squatter's action, her current level of participation in the local community is limited.

It used to be very nice, we fought for everything together...if one had a refrigerator everybody would use it...but now it is not like that anymore...people became very selfish and envious...if you get a little bit more people don't treat you the same...and that's why I don't participate anymore.

She feels that some mothers at the Club put her aside, because she does not live near the school...even when she wants to participate in some activities she is not informed of the time and place it will take place. Another reason she mentions is that she is more critical of the work that the principal and teachers perform at the school. Her daughter had a learning problem and she did not agree with the way the teacher was handling it.

The other mothers agree with everything that they say (principal and teachers). I think it should not be like that...sometimes they are wrong and we have to say it...but they are very open...they listen to us.

Noemi was invited to join the Mothers' Club and the School Council by the Vice principal with whom she maintains a good and close relationship.

V. [Vice-principal] invited me to come and participate in the School Council. She said it will add to my resumé, because I want to become a teacher in a municipal school. So that's why I started participating in the school. But then I liked so much, I made so many friends that I wanted to participate anyway. Besides I know how important it is for parents to participate in the school education of their children. My

daughter had problems last year but because I was in close contact with her teacher things got much better. She is doing well now.

Noemi also mentioned that she has made many friends at the Club, and that has been very important to break the social isolation of domestic work.

After I started participating in the Club I realized that I had to get out of the house, to get involved with other things. I think I was becoming sick, all in the head, because I was limited to that boring routine of cooking, cleaning and taking care of children. I needed to get out, get active again.

(at the time of the second interview she had received the result of the selection: she was approved but with a low grade and probably will not be hired. She reported that the exam was very difficult for people like her who do not have time and access to all the materials to study).

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M4**

### **Learning what goes on inside schools**

“it is important to know how they are teaching our kids...how decisions are made...I think it is important that we understand what goes on inside the school our children attend so we can help them to achieve better grades and be more enthusiastic about the school.”

### **Learning how to help her kids with school work**

“it is good to be aware of what they are learning so that you can help them at home....my older boy doesn't need help but with the younger one I need to be constantly helping.”

### **Participation as a strategy to professional career in municipal schools**

“you know I wanted to participate in the School Council to improve my chance of being approved in the teachers' selection. I have studied really hard with another mother whom I met at the Mothers' Club, but I did not get a good grade...next year I will try again. V. (the vice principal) says she will help me.”

### **Contacts with teachers to solve child rearing problems and personal growth**

“when I have a problem with my kids...or even women's problems...husband and stuff...I can always come and talk to V. She was the literacy teacher of my son and she did a wonderful job...she is really good...and we became good friends.”

### **Making new friends**

“You know at the Club there are some mothers whom I don't like very much...they want to do everything by themselves, like they own the Club...but I made good friends there...like for example A. (M7) who is going to gym class with me at the community center and is studying for the public selection too.”

“it is good to get out of your house and meet new people...life at home is very boring...you become dumb because you don't learn new things”

### Getting involved in other activities

“after participating at the club I realized it is good to participate and joined the Walkers’ Association at my community. I used to watch them everyday but never had the courage to ask what they were doing...then one day I went there and asked and now I have joined...we walk everyday for an hour.”

### Profile Tamara (M5)

**Age 37; Married, 2 children (7,10)**

**Occupation : homemaker (takes care of a child during the day)**

Tamara was invited by the principal to participate in the Mothers’ Club three years ago. She said that she was invited because the principal “knew that I liked to help in parties, that I like to have fun...so all the parties I am involved in organizing.”

At 37, two children (7,10) and without a high school education, Tamara helps to organize all the social functions at the Mothers’ Club. She was particularly excited about a day trip the mothers had organized the week before the interview:

We had such a great time...just us...no husbands , no kids, where else could I do that? To travel just with friends? We did crazy things during the trip! That’s what is wonderful in the Mothers’ Club, we can invent things to do together...it is very lonely if you stay only at home.

She also reported appreciating the workshops she has participated in the Club, although she regards the skills learned as a hobby and has no professional or income generation ambition:

It was good to learn to make tapestry and embroidery so we can have something to do in our free time...but the best thing is what we talk while we work...all the gossip and also serious stuff...you know I am not here to learn anything...I am here because of the girls (the other mothers)...I don’t intend to work...my husband is doing all right...and I get a little money for personal expenses taking care of my neighbor’s son.

But Tamara acknowledged that is good to know what her daughters are learning at the school and the closer relationship with the principal and teachers makes her feel important.

I feel really good when the principal greets me by my name in front of everybody.

The other parents see that I am close to her, that I work with her. When I organize things, such as parties and bazaars, I feel happy when everything goes well. I feel that I am doing something useful and helping other people, that I am a contributing member of the school. I know that I can also get help here. When I am depressed all I need to do is come to the Club and talk. They understand me, they have similar problems. So in a way I help, but I am being helped too.

## Major Reported Effects of Participation: M5

### Breaking social isolation

"I don't miss a meeting...it is my time to have fun...I get so bored at home...where else would I go to be with my friends? We come here and relax...we talk about our kids, our husbands. My husband doesn't like to go out, and of course does not allow me to go out alone...but when I tell him I am going out with the girls of the Club it is OK...he knows it is an all-woman thing...he has no idea how much fun we have together."

### Increased self-esteem

"I get excited when it's Wednesday...I wonder what to wear...I put some lipstick...I least I get out of my house....at home I don't pay any attention to how I look because it's just the kids and my elderly mother."

"I feel important to belong to the founding group of the MC,...I know other mothers gossip about us....but I think they are envious...because we are the ones the principal calls on when she needs any help from parents."

### Emotional support

"when I am depressed I come here and talk, and talk....of course I don't tell everybody all my personal problems...but just by listening to others' problems I feel better....I realized I am not the only one to have problems....even how to handle behavior problems of my girls...we give a lot of advice to each other."

### Profile: Taís (M6)

**Age 44 Married, 2 children (7,14)**

**Occupation: homemaker**

Taís seems to be a very reserved and quiet person. She had no contact with the school before she was invited to join the Mothers' Club by other participating mothers. At 44, 2 children and a low-educational attainment (did not finished 5<sup>th</sup> grade), she has been participating in the Club for 2 years. She reported that she decided to get more involved in this school,

because I feel that my younger daughter needs more help, and you know parents are more involved in the education of their children when they are young.....my son goes to another school, he is older and I don't go there very often.

Taís said she enjoys the opportunity to be part of a group because she does not have many friends outside her family. When asked if racial prejudice (she is the only black mother in the group) could be a factor for her social isolation she responded hesitantly:

That maybe yes...you know here in the south people do have prejudice...but I think it has more to do with the way I am...I am quiet...difficult to open up....that's why I like this group...they are totally crazy...sometimes they say things that I get embarrassed...but they make me laugh.

Taís took computer lessons but had to stop because her father was hospitalized and she needed to take care of him. According to her:

I want to take computer lessons to be aware of what is going on...to know the new things of the world...I want to be able to talk to my son...although he already has more education than I have....he helps his young sister with homework....that is why I want to continue to learn new things. To keep up with them.

Taís reported that the friendships established with other mothers were the most important gain she received from her participation. The contact with the principal and teachers also was mentioned.

I really like this school...my daughter also adores it...I admire the work of the principal and teachers...I have nothing to criticize...even in the Mothers' Club, some mothers say it is a closed group, difficult to get involved with...but I feel comfortable here, I like the other mothers.

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M6**

### **Friendships**

"I didn't know a soul in this school and now through the mothers in Mothers' Club I got to know so many new people...I say hello from the moment I enter that gate....I don't feel so lonely anymore."

### **Opportunity to acquire knowledge**

"I have not been able to take all the courses...but just the idea that I have a place to come and learn is good...and for free! I know I will learn a lot of good stuff here."

### **Knowing her child's learning environment**

"it is good because here you learn what you children are learning, what teachers are working with them..I think it is good because you can tell them to do their homework and study for the tests...when you are not here you don't know what is going on...for example...a study trip...if you are not participating you think it is just for fun...but because here at the Mothers' Club we help to organize the trips we know that the goal is also to learn something."

### **Emotional support**

"although I am not very talkative I sometimes tell one of two mothers about my problems...it is good to be able to share with someone...just by talking you feel better... if you stay at home your problems seem bigger than they really are...sometimes I have to remind myself how lucky I am...and not complain about my life."



**Profile: Ana (M7)****Age 28; Married, 3 children (8, 4, 2)****Occupation: homemaker**

Ana admitted that she started participating in the school for very individualistic reasons. She joined the Mothers' Club to be able to attend the computer classes offered for its members, and became a member of the School Council to have more points for the public selection to become a municipal teacher. At 28, married with 3 young children (8,4,2), Ana comes from Rio de Janeiro and has been living in this community for 10 years. She mentioned that she had to give up the computer lessons because she could not get child-care at the time, but continues to participate in the Club:

I continue here because the Club has expanded the circle of my friends...I met different people, engaged in different activities....my world was very small... home, church, home, church...here they make trips, dinners...it is much better.

Ana has a high school degree and plans to become a part-time teacher at a municipal school. She was not approved in the last public selection although she studied hard with another mother whom she met at the Club. She said that she would like to go to college to study psychology or education. She is a very active member of the Mormon church in her community and dedicates her weekends to voluntary work. At the school she enjoys the proximity to teachers and the principal:

When you are in the Mothers' Club you are closer to the teachers and the principal, it is easier to go and talk to them...sometimes for mothers it is difficult to go and talk to the principal but if you know them like we do it is much easier.

Although she is still a member of the School Council she thinks (she was visibly embarrassed to admit this) that the meetings are very boring and uninteresting. She said she stays quiet most of the time:

I don't say a thing...I stay mute. You know the things they discuss do not interest me...but it is important...so I let them (the other mothers) decide...I know they want the best for the kids...so it is the best for my kids too....so sometimes I miss the meetings...but I am still a member.

Ana reported that the reason why she continues participating is the friends that she has made in the Club. But she also believes that:

You have to be here...to know the work that school professionals are really doing to have the right to give your opinion about things....we cannot say anything if you are not here. So probably when all my children reach grade school I will be participating even more. To make sure they do well in school.

**Main Reported Effects of Participation: M7****Access to educational opportunities (lessons for free)**

"I joined the Club because I wanted the computer lessons...we have a computer at home and my son knows more than I...so I thought I want to take lessons...its for free...so I joined the Mothers' Club."

"the courses on tapestry and embroidery were good too...I never knew how to do these things...it is an opportunity to learn even if I am not doing it a lot."

### **Expanding social network**

"the circle of my friends was very small...only people from the family and church....now I know many people...they are fun....they do things together. This friend from the Club (Noemi), we studied together every day....we went to the library together....worked really hard...it was so good to have her....and if I hadn't come to the Club I would not have met her"

### **Closer relationship with the principal and teachers**

"It is much easier to come to them when you participate....they listen to you more promptly. Let me give you an example: one day my son got home without his sweater, which I was still paying for! I came to the school immediately and went straight to the principal's office. She and the school supervisor helped me find the sweater right away...they knew me...they knew who I was. That's why it is so important to participate here in the school. You are not just a mother, a face without a name. You are someone, someone that also works for the school."

### **Learning how the school works for professional career**

"It is also good to be here to see how things work...because I want to become a teacher...so the more I know about the internal affairs of the schools the better...even the things about School Council are good to be aware of...even if I don't like that much."

**Profile: Vanilda (M8)**

**Age: 36; Married, 1 child (8)**

**Occupation: homemaker (occasionally prepares food for parties)**

Vanilda joined the Mothers' Club 3 years ago, invited by the principal, after she volunteered to help in the organization of a school party. She reported that she was very socially active (organizing parties, school trips) in the small community where she grew up, but after moving to the city she started working and did not get involved in volunteer work. At 36, with one child, Vanilda said that she is recently recovering from an emotional trauma which left her with severe depression and low self-esteem. According to her, participating in the school has been the best thing that happen to her lately because:

I got a lot of support from the principal and the other mothers. I think that because I was a member of the Club they did everything they could to help me. They were true friends, I feel very grateful for the support I received, from the principal, from the school supervisor and also from the other mothers.

Vanilda believes that school professionals and parents should be partners in children's education and each one has a role to perform.

You know some parents just leave their kids at the school to get rid of them....that's not right, each has to do a part...teachers should teach and parents should help with homework and behavior...I have always been very open to talking to teachers about my son...even before joining the Mothers' Club.

Vanilda was elected treasurer of the Mothers' Club due to her prior experience working as a super-market cashier, and also because she possess a high school degree in accounting. Although she has been invited to be a representative in the School Council she thinks she is not ready to take such as responsibility. She perceives distinct levels of responsibility involving each type of school involvement:

They wanted me to join the School Council but I told them I am not ready for it yet...I like to learn things step by step, to do things right. Being a School Council representative means I would have to talk in front of many people at meetings. I am not ready for that. I only accepted to be the treasurer of Mothers' Club because I know how to handle money...I keep detailed records...so in order to join the School Council I have to learn more from the other mothers first.

Vanilda receives orders to catering in parties through contacts she establishes at the school. She plans to open her own business soon.

I started cooking only for school functions, and then people liked my food. Some teachers, and other mothers ordered birthday cakes and other things. Since I have so many clients now, I am thinking of opening a bakery shop here at the community.

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M8**

### **Increased self-esteem**

"after everything that happened in my family I felt very down...I gained a lot of weight...felt like the most miserable person in the world...but the girls (mothers of the MC) helped me a lot...they encouraged me to continue...with their help I regained my self-esteem."

### **Professional support and guidance**

"the school counselor and the teachers came to my house and oriented me on what I should do with my son....they referred him to a psychologist...and in the classroom he received a lot of extra attention too...that's a good thing about participating....they know you and do their best to help."

### **Acquisition of Knowledge**

"I am taking computer classes...it is good to be informed about these things to keep up with what your child is learning....so I can talk with my son about computers...I like reading...I like being up to what's going on in the world."

"I learned different kinds of hand work which I didn't know...like painting, embroidery...it is always good to know."

### **Friendships**

"I would say that the most important thing that I gained by participating at the MC was true friends....we come here and just by talking we help each other a lot....these girls are my best friends now...we do everything together."

### **Expanding Social Network**

"you know a lot of people through the club...this is good but sometimes you create a lot of enemies too...they think that we are all in favor of the principal, but we are not...I am always trying to invite new mothers to join...I wish we had more people participating"

### **Income Generating Opportunity**

"sometimes I received orders to make cakes and things for parties...a lot of mothers at the school now know and like my food....sometimes I even donate a cake for the club's fundraising but sometimes I charge the school....you know when they (teachers and principal) order a cake for themselves or their families."

### **Profile Sônia (M9)**

**Age: 46; Married, 5 kids (from 19 to 10)**

**Occupation: seamstress**

Sônia is the most actively participating mother in the Quarter School. She participates in the School Council and is known by many teachers, parents and school personnel. She started participating after an incident with her son, then 8, (first boy after 3 girls) who got into a fight at school. She felt that she needed to guarantee his physical safety and started to attend the Circle of Parents and Teachers (CPM) meetings.

I begun to participate because I don't like injustice...I am like this...nice up to a limit, I bear with a lot of things...but don't go too far! I wanted to know why my son was being threatened during recess. And his teacher and the principal were not even aware of it. After I told them they did nothing to stop it, so I realized I had to be in the school myself.

Sônia described herself as a very caring and protective person, not only to her children but also to other children:

I am like a big mother, I like to take care of people, to make them feel good. And I do that not only with my children, when I am at the school I look after all kids like they were mine. Even the teachers say that I am a big mother, because sometimes I bake things for them, I stay in their classes when they need a short break.

Sônia is the only mother who continued participating after the CPM in the Quarter School was disbanded. She reported that:

The other mothers left, they say that they don't like the School Council. I think that we are here to help the school, to help our kids. So it doesn't matter if it is the CPM or the School Council, what it matters is that we have to participate, we cannot stay at home complaining about the bad things that happen at the school. It is true that we had more fun in the CPM, that we had more space to do what we wanted to do, but I think we have to continue participating to make this school a little better.

Sônia emphasized that in financial terms participation is not worth for her, because during the time that she is at the school she could be working at her home. However she mentioned that most of her clients (for sewing) are from the school (teachers and other mothers) and many times she comes to school to collect and deliver orders.

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M9**

### **Closer relationships with teachers and the principal**

“when I started here I thought they (teachers) were up there like God, and we were only here (down)..but then I saw that it is not like that...there are things that we agree on and sometimes we even give some ideas to them. Now I even call them by their first names...I say I am going to call you this way...if you don't like it I will shut my mouth and call you Mrs...I have free access to the school...I enter through the teachers' room or the Secretary because they all know me.”

“Then after she (the principal) told me she would give a place to enroll my son she gave me a big hug...and lots of attention, I felt that she really liked me...and then I became much more committed to participate.”

### **More trust in the school environment**

“After I started participating I gained trust, because I know with whom my kids are...if they have any problem with the teachers I am aware of....like that episode when the teacher was unfair to my son and I went to talk to her....and then we called a meeting with the principal and the other students....they were afraid of saying anything against her because they thought that it could affect their grades...but I spoke for them...I was the only mother there.”

### **Privileges in access and enrollment**

“I managed to convince, convince no,...I talked to the vice-principal about getting a place for my son...they told me ‘there are no vacancies, we are over the limit, but your son we will take him in’...because I am a committed mother...I always give a hand to the teachers...when they need to leave the room for any reason I would stay there for them.”

### **Social recognition**

“most of the mothers at the school know me....sometimes they are envious of me because I do things right....my house is very clean and organized and I do a lot of things here....”

“...my husband says that everybody knows me at the community...fine, they know me because I work hard...of course a lot of gossip comes with it too but I don't care.”

### **Income generating opportunities**

“I get a lot of orders for sewing from teachers and school staff....so if you need to contact me just talk to them...they know where I live.”

**Profile: Vilma (M10)**  
**Age 34; Married, 2 children (11,12)**  
**Occupation: homemaker**

Vilma was invited to join the School Council by Sônia during a school meeting. They had worked together in the community association and Vilma decided to participate in the school to work with her friend again. But she said that:

To be honest at first I didn't want to come...I thought it would be just problems...more trouble. I didn't want to be between parents and the teachers, I knew that I would be the target for criticism from both sides. I like to avoid trouble, but Sônia insisted and I didn't want to say no to her. So I came.

Vilma has been participating in the School Council for 2 years and only now is she starting to feel like a member of the group:

It took me a long time to learn about what was going on and what we were supposed to do...now that I am ready it's time to go...you know nobody prepares us to be in the School Council...I think even the principal needs some preparation, I have the feeling that nobody really knows what we are supposed to do in the Council.

Vilma reported subtle but important changes in her life since she started participating. She feels more confident and better able to express her ideas and feelings. She says that she is able to articulate her ideas and to construct consistent arguments to defend them.

The changes have affected her personal and family life. Her relationship with her husband involves more discussion and shared decision making. She reports a more active role in the education of her two children, particularly related to issues she has learned are important to discuss with them

Sometimes husbands think they are the big boss inside the house because they bring home the money...but now I know that I have the right to give my opinion. For example he didn't want to talk about sexuality issues with our daughters...but I said I am going to talk so they can learn the right things...it is better to start early...and not to wait for them to learn wrong things.

Vilma expressed doubts about the impact parents can have in school's functioning. Although she agrees that parents have to participate to demand a good education for their children she admitted that parental participation in this particular school is low and dependent on the good will of the principal.

Sometimes even I have doubts about whether parents can really change things in the school. It depends on the principal, if she likes to work with parents or not. I will wait to see this new principal, if she is not open to parents I will quit! I will not work with someone who doesn't want to share power with parents. I don't want to be here just for decoration!

## Major Reported Effects of Participation: M10

### Increased self-confidence

“what you sure gain here is more confidence...you are not inhibited to talk to a lot of people...like yesterday I spoke to more or less 70 people. I could never imagine I would do it.”

“nowadays if I go to a job interview I would say exactly what I think...there is no point in making things up...they would get you anyway.....so I would show how I am from the beginning.”

### Broadening vocabulary and the ability to construct arguments

“for example in an interview like this, sometime ago I would just repeat things that I had heard from other people...now I am using my own words...and I have arguments to explain what I am saying...I would not depend on what other people think...I express my own mind.”

“At the beginning I did not understand of lot of words they said...like NAE...do you know what it means? I still don’t know the exact meaning but I know what it does...and that happened to a lot of parents...but I’ve learned most of what I need to know.”

### Learning important issues in child-rearing

“by talking to other mothers and teachers and I learn a lot of things about the education of my children...about sexuality issues, drugs...you learn what is going on and how to raise them to deal with these problems.”

### More equality in family relationships

“It is not that now I argue more with my husband...no...but I know that all the work that I do at home is work too...so I have the right to give my opinion...and now I am up to discussing everything...from what we should buy to the kids’ education.”

### Profile Mara (M11)

**Age: 40; Married, 2 children (12, 16)**

**Occupation: homemaker (informal video producer/recorder)**

Mara participated for 6 years in the CPM in the Quarter School. According to her, she was invited by the principal to join the CPM because:

You now, I am different from most of the people that live here....I am on another level...I think he (the principal) saw that I was capable of making an important contribution to the school, and he wanted people like me to set an example to other parents.

Mara’s perception of being different from the rest of the community is based on the different lifestyle she has when compared to other residents of the housing complex. Her apartment has an iron gate which separates it from the rest of the building; she owns a car and a cellular phone. Mara has many home appliances, such as a big screen TV, which produces a dramatic contrast with the poverty of the housing complex.

Mara was president of the CPM for 4 years and after it was disbanded she was invited to participate in the School Council. She resigned from the position in the School Council because she thought parents were manipulated by school professionals.

You know what I think? At the CPM we raised our own funds and the school needed us, they respected us more...now in the School Council...we (parents) are there just for decoration...at least all the experiences that I had...all the meetings that I attended. I am not going to the school just to do what the principal and the teachers want me to do, no way. They wanted me to continue participating in the School Council but I don't want to be part of that. None of my friends, with the exception of Sônia, continue to participate in the school.

Other mothers mentioned that Mara had started an informal video taping business during her time at the CPM. She would tape social events and school trips and sell extra copies to students and their families. When asked about this income generating activity she was evasive:

Oh...the video thing...that's not serious...as I said everybody knows me around here...I don't know even their names, but they all know me. If you walk around with me you would see...everybody saying 'Hi'! So some of these people ask me to go and tape their birthday parties, weddings, baptisms...so I go. Well it's true...I started doing that when I was at the CPM...that's when I bought the camera and learned how to do it. At the beginning the tapes were not good at all, but people would buy them anyway.

In assessing her experience of participation Mara reported that:

Honestly I think I gave more than I received...I gave my time...I think the biggest thing that I gave was my time because I used to spend most of my time there. It was a hurry...at the beginning it was good because we did a lot of things...there were a lot of things to do. I gave a lot of myself...but I think I have gained a lot too. We worked hard but we also had a lot of fun...it was good...it was very good, so I think it was good for me and for them...because I did what I could do.

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M11**

### **Social recognition**

"everybody knows me here...and people here are not easy...if you see the mothers at the school gate...they don't speak...they yell...oh my God...so the teacher like me...but they liked me even before I participated in the school, because I am someone that they can speak to."

"the kids still know me and say hi to me. I got their admiration and their respect...that's good to see. They liked me because we had a lot of fun in the trips I organized. Kids like that."

### **Making friends**

"I made so many friends...still now we call each other and they come here...we get together sometimes. There were times that we even took our meals at the school...we would get so



excited with the activities that we were promoting...of course there were disappointments...but we were a good group.”

### **Income generating activity**

“I started doing it for fun...my husband got the camera and I started doing it...at the beginning the tapes were not very good...but I had the chance of practicing...and the people would buy the tapes no matter how bad they were....so now they continue to come and ask me to tape social events.”

### **Profile: Gilda (M12)**

**Age 40; Married, 2 children (15, 19)**

**Occupation: homemaker (seamstress)**

Gilda participated in the first CPM group created at the Quarter School, right after she moved to the housing complex. She described the various activities developed by the group:

We did a bit of everything, we helped at the school office, organized festivities...but mostly we raised funds to help the school...anything that needed extra cash...a broken window, materials for poor students...all that came from CPM funds. Looking back, I think we did everything that was possible to get money for the school.

Gilda believes that parents should participate to contribute to the school. One particular way parents could help, according to her, is by supervising and controlling the behavior of teenaged students during recess. But she admitted that the major reason which motivated her to start participating was to be part of a group:

You know...that's me...I need to be around people...talking to people...otherwise I get depressed...I take courses at the association...I know everybody here in the community...if someone needs me I don't care about distance or time...I go and help...I don't just take care of my kids. When I was at the school I took care of all the kids...they were all the same to me. Particularly the teenagers, they got into a lot of trouble, but I used to be there to help them, or prevent them from misbehaving.

Gilda thinks that the CPM was disbanded because it gradually lost its function as the school's extra source of funding. According to her there was nothing left for mothers to do in the school.

In the CPM we did not have the power to decide things, but we were there to help...we would do anything to help the teachers and the principal...that's the part that I liked the most...to be able to be with other mothers and help. I think I am a big mother...I love to help people around me. In the School Council is different, they want us to participate in important decisions about education, but I am not sure if the principal really takes into consideration the opinion of mothers.

Gilda reported learning many things through participation in the school, particularly things that helped her become a better parent:

I learned so many things to teach my kids...because if you stay home you don't learn what is going on out there...through participation you learn how to defend yourself from the dangers out there...and you can teach your kids...for someone like me who has two adolescents at home...you learn from teachers and from the young people themselves.

### **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M12**

#### **Positive self-image**

"Up to this day I meet students in the streets and they smile at me, they say hello...they still remember what we did for them...it feels so good, I like to help people...I believe I was born to be what I am...a wife and a mothers of two adolescents...and I like that."

"The other mothers still like me...they are thinking of creating a mothers' club at the school and they want me to join them...I might go...we had such a good time together."

#### **Acquisition of knowledge and skills**

"I am the kind of person that learns through observing...I learned words and spelling during the time I was participating at the school. Sometimes I say a word and think it's correct but it is not....so I observe the way other people talk....even writing, you know I am too lazy to read, so sometimes I don't know how to spell some words. I used to ask my son's teacher to give me spelling exercises too. So even though I was not in the classroom I was also learning Portuguese. I still make mistakes...but nowadays I can talk to anyone."

#### **Acquisition of parenting skills**

"Being out there (in the school) I learned so many things to teach my kids...things are not easy nowadays with problems with sex and drugs...you have to be aware of what is going on in their world...because I had a lot of contact with other adolescents, many of them were my kids' friends...so I learned how to establish a dialogue. I do not grant total freedom...they have to ask me before doing things...but I have learned to listen and talk to them."

**Profile: Maria do Carmo (M13)**

**Age: 38; Married 4 children (7,7,10,15)**

**Occupation: homemaker**

Maria do Carmo participated for 4 years in the CPM and reported that it was a good experience. She stopped participating when the CPM was disbanded. She described herself as someone who likes to participate:

I am like that, I like to help people...if someone needs help I am there...I do what I can to help other people...if they are sick, old, I am always here for them...I am always available...that's me...I am the manager of the building...and I try to solve all the problems. Sometimes I get too involved in other people's problems, but I need to know that I am doing something for my community and for my neighbors.

Maria do Carmo is now planning to create a new mothers' group at the school to support a traditional dance club. She reported that her daughters participate in the dance club (they have performed in other public schools) and that she wants to organize mothers in order to buy costumes and raise funds for the group. She participated in the principal's election campaign against the former principal who she considered:

she was nice but too soft...the students were taking over the school...she was not firm enough to control what was going on inside the school...we started having drugs and all sorts of problems. And although she said that she wanted parental participation, she really never invited us to go there and do something concrete. It were just big words.

Maria do Carmo was invited to participate in the School Council but she considered it a serious commitment which she could not undertake at the moment. Her dream is to go back to school and finish her education (she dropped out of in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade) but her husband does not allow her. He does not want her to leave home in the evenings, although they live just across the street from the school.

Among the main effects she reported from participation was the knowledge and wisdom she acquired when interacting with people from different backgrounds. She reported that

You learn so much by talking to other people and listening to their ideas. Sometimes I went to the group meetings thinking one thing and observed and listened to what mothers...and even the teachers...had to say about that matter. Many times I changed my mind....when it didn't change at least I got a different perspective.

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M13**

### **Emotional support**

"sometimes you are hurt due to something, are upset with something....and that you keep to yourself...and when you talk to someone else different ideas come up...and then you think...this person thinks differently, and then you start to cheer up...learning from what the other people think about life...about different ways of survival."

"now I am taking medication for depression...the doctor said I should go out and do things that I like....I liked when we had the group at the school...I feel good when I am useful and help others."

### **Acquisition of parenting skills**

"through the contact with other students and their mothers you learn a lot about things you should teach your kids. Many students had behavior problems because parents did not come to school....not even when they were called to come...they work full time and don't come. I think we have to be there to learn how to better raise our kids...it helps when you are close to them and their teachers...we can talk things over."

"I don't think that the children of parents who participate have special privileges at school...but they are usually better treated because teachers know that they will be respected and so they respect our kids...and if any problem comes up they can come and talk to us before the problem gets too serious."

### Acquisition of knowledge/wisdom

“you learn...oh God you learn so much by talking to others...we gain wisdom...we get to know more things...we don't gain (in financial terms)...they don't pay us...we go there by our own will...so what we really gain is knowledge...to learn things that we did not know...learn things beyond what we knew before.”

“see the case of Mara (M11) and Gilda (M12)? Mara is still at home but she learned how to use the video camera and now is using it to go and record parties...she learned that at the school. She is already making her money, right? And Gilda I am sure she is doing something with what she learned at the school...I heard she was sewing and doing crochet bikinis...I am sure she is doing well too.”

### Social recognition

“they treat me well at the school...they smile at me and I feel welcome...of course there are some persons who are not very nice...but you have to understand them. This week my daughter needed glasses...I took the prescription and they made all the necessary arrangements right away...I get along well with teachers, students and other people at the school.”

“ it is so good that the children know, they get to know you...and they ask for help...they talk to us...the other day a boy that is not even at the school anymore came to talk to me...he knew me from the CPM.”

### Profile Lena (M14)

**Age: 41; Married, 2 children (13,19)**

**Occupation: homemaker (several income generating activities: sells silver jewelry and cosmetics, sells magazine subscription)**

Lena started participating after being invited by other mothers. She described herself as very socially active; she has done voluntary work at the Residents' Association and during the squatters' action she participated in several committees to negotiate with the government officials. She reported that the 8 years she spent in the CPM were very productive and fun:

I liked...I liked so much...because it was a true integration...you have your activities at home but the moment you get out it's another thing. We talked a lot...talked to the people of the school and other people that came....shared different experiences...we traveled, we went to conferences.

Lena feels that the CPM was disbanded because it disturbed the school professionals since mothers were inside the school and could supervise their work. She mentioned that some principals supported the mothers of the CPM but others did not pay attention to mothers' opinions. She was invited to join the School Council but resigned after 1 year because:

It was not the kind of thing for me, someone who does not like to serve as a doll! Because what teachers bring to the School Council is already decided...they have been through it before and bring the matter just to get our agreement...I don't like to do that... that's why I asked to leave.

Lena also said that participation in the School Council entails things that parents are not able or willing to do:

Sometimes members of the School Council have to go to meetings at the Department of Education. It is far from here, and the parents have to pay for their transportation. Not to mention that many mothers are not allowed to be away from their homes in the evenings. That's the time when most husbands are at home, and they don't want their wives to be out in some sort of meeting. That's not my case, but I know many mothers who don't participate because of these reasons.

Lena described excitedly her participation in national and international conferences of parents' associations in schools. She reported that the contacts with other people made her want to pursue a higher educational attainment, but she had to give up the idea because of the age limit of day schools (most of adult literacy classes are offered in the evenings).

According to Lena, her husband would not allow her to go to evening classes:

When I saw all those women presenting at the conferences, I decided that I needed to go back to school and get more education myself, to be somebody, to be able to express myself. I enrolled in the adult education program here at the school. At first my husband didn't say anything, but when the first school day came he said no way, he was not going to be home with the kids all by himself. That he was tired enough from working all day long.

In assessing her experience of participation, Lena reported that:

It was useful for everybody...maybe not for some school professionals who thought of us as spies...but the kids liked that we were there...the other students who needed help benefitted too.. and for us it was a life learning experience...you learn how to love yourself more...and you learn through the social contact with others...oh...you learn so much.

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M14**

### **Personal gratification**

"we really dedicated ourselves....we did not receive anything to work...but we were doing good things to improve the time of our children at the school...That's how I think...we, who don't have money to put our children in private schools have to do the best for them inside the school, because school is their second home"

"that participating brings you a lot of satisfaction it does...not only through acquiring things for the CPM, for the school....for example we raised funds and collected many donations...so after selling some of the clothes we would keep the rest at the CPM room...so one cold day we could take something and warm up a child....and you see that special shine in her eyes...while your child at home is warm...but that gratifies you because you have dressed that child."

### **Exposure to different contexts and people**

"we went on trips...to attend conferences and to take students...we went to many different places...in these conferences there are lectures that are very useful...you share experiences, meet a lot of people, it's actually a lot of fun....you talk, you participate, of course it is not only about the CPM....there is the fun."

### **Incentive to pursue more education**

“participating was very valuable to me....in the conferences that I have participated in...I actually got excited about going back to school...but then due to financial problems...actually also because of my age....my age is over the limit...I don’t have the right to attend a day public school...and I cannot afford a private school....and my husband does not allow me to take evening classes.”

“at the conferences one got motivated because one could meet with a lot of people with a (educational) level this high! Not that I don’t know how to behave myself but these are the things that lead to you want to learn more...want to participate more.”

### **Increased self-esteem**

“by participating in the school....you learn to like yourself more...because if you don’t get out of the house...you let yourself go...you let go the way you look...but when you have to go out everyday....of course you will not go out the way you are at home...we did not dress in a sophisticated way to go to the school...but we put on some make-up, lipstick...dressed up a little bit...you learn how to take better care of yourself...to like yourself more...you learn to have a higher self-esteem.”

“One mother, I am not going to say her name, her husband did not allow her to go to the CPM meetings. Do you know what she did? She did all the house chores before leaving, dressed up and came to school.....she said that she needed that for her self-esteem...that she needed to do something for her....then she would rush back home when it was time for the husband to arrive.”

### **Profile Zenir (M15)**

**Age: 37; Married, 3 children (13,13, 17)**

**Occupation: homemaker (helps serving in a nearby snack bar 3 hours a day)**

Zenir was invited to join the CPM by Mara (M11) and Gilda (M12) and participated actively in the school for 6 years. She said she is sorry that:

They finished with the CPM at the school. I was very hurt because it was good ...we sold snacks....suppose a door lock or a window was broken....we had money to fix it. Now they complain that the funds that the Department of Education sends are not enough....because there are a lot of students and they destroy things. At least we had the money.

She reported that she was not invited to join the School Council after the CPM was closed but would decline anyway, because some meetings are held in the evenings and sometimes outside the community and her husband would not allow her to attend. At 37, low educational attainment (she did not go to high school) Zenir reported that she dedicates her time to household chores and to activities that will generate her own pocket money.

She repeatedly mentioned that she participated at the CPM just for the love of the cause and because she thought that:

It is important for parents to participate....because if they (children) see that their mother is participating, that their mother is always at the school...that’s a sign that

they are interested in their education, that they care for them. I think that my children liked that I was participating. And I liked it too, because my best friends were there.

Although Zenir is currently vice manager of the building she reported that she is not participating in any other community activity. She said she might consider participating in the school again particularly if the Mothers' Club to support the dance club is created.

Zenir seemed not very enthusiastic about her experience of participation in the school:

If I look back and think what have I learned or gained from participating in the school? I don't know...I don't think I have gained a lot...well maybe I have learned how to relate to people...because you have to learn how to socialize with different people. I have always got along well with the other mothers, but I did have to learn how to interact with teachers and the other professionals. To make myself heard. That is true, I think I have learned to speak up on behalf of other mothers and my own children.

## **Major Reported Effects of Participation: M15**

### **Making friends**

"the CPM was open to any parent but only a group of 8 mothers participated actively. It was so good! I got along with everybody...we are still good friends...that's one thing that you learn...how to relate to other people...to any kind of people."

"we always learn something from other people...I am not going to say I didn't...we always learn...for example their pre-school teachers...up to this date I talk to them...I go often there to seem them...we talk and all...up to this day...they also have a strong relationship with me...I often go there...when I need to talk I go there."

### **Acquisition of parenting skills**

"I think that in a way it helps with the girls...I learned to talk more with them....there (at the school) we had to talk a lot, we talked a lot. Sometimes we had meetings just for us, do you understand? To talk about the problems that we had at home...there we got to know each other, the difficulties...that was very good, very productive, useful...there was a teacher there too...when we needed advice from a teacher we asked her. When we needed something we could look for her ...I personally looked for her on several occasions"

### **Recognition/access to resources**

"I don't think I have the right to demand anything from school professionals because I was participating, working for free at the school. I think that's wrong...but I have to admit that I received a benefit once...I just went there and got a place for my godson...I don't know if it was just luck....but I got the place right away."

**VITA****Lúcia Vieira Dellagnelo**

<b>1981-86</b>	<b>Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina Florianópolis, SC, Brazil</b>	<b>B.A. December, 86</b>
<b>1987-90</b>	<b>Project Coordinator Fundação Catarinense de Educação Especial Florianópolis, SC, Brazil</b>	
<b>1992-94</b>	<b>Technical Director Institute for Development and Learning São Paulo, SP, Brazil</b>	
<b>1994-95</b>	<b>Harvard Graduate School of Education Cambridge, Massachusetts</b>	<b>M.Ed. June, 95</b>
<b>1994-00</b>	<b>Harvard Graduate School of Education Cambridge, Massachusetts</b>	<b>Ed.D. June, 2000</b>
<b>1995-0</b>	<b>Independent Consultant Education and Community Development</b>	